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Teacher Perspectives on Controversial Young Adult Literature: Change in a Middle School Classroom Culture

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TEACHER PERSPECTIVES ON
CONTROVERSIAL YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE:
CHANGE IN A MIDDLE SCHOOL CLASSROOM CULTURE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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Title: Teacher Perspectives on Controversial Young Adult Literature: Change in a Middle School Classroom Culture

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The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore practicing middle school teachers' perspectives on their decision to incorporate controversial young adult literature into their classrooms. The teachers described how their decision affected the curriculum and how the integration of this literature into the curriculum changed or influenced the culture of their middle school classroom. Even if some teachers consider controversial young adult novels as assets to their curriculum that would engage their students, they opt for safer titles in order to avoid confrontations with parents, administrators, or school board members.

The in-service teachers selected for this study were middle school teachers of language arts; they participated in focus groups interviews of four teachers each and five individual in-depth, semi-structured interviews. As opposed to an explanation of middle school teachers' views, the goal of this study is to explore and describe the teachers' perspectives on controversial young adult literature and its effect on a middle school classroom culture. The participants' responses were audio-taped and transcribed.

Participants' comments were analyzed in order to find common themes and ideas that related to the teachers' perceptions concerning classroom culture and controversial young adult literature. Data were analyzed with the theories of critical literacy as a backdrop. The findings were validated by the themes that emerged across the data in

comparison to the information presented in the literature. Each case study was organized around the key questions posed by the study. Results from the study indicated that the participants' classroom cultures were positively affected by controversial young adult literature. Furthermore, through the themes found in this literature, students have been inspired to strategize ways to problem solve, deal with conflict, and overcome struggles. In addition, participants reported that students experienced deeper thinking, moral sensitivity, social awareness, and tolerance. Although this study presented interesting insights, the researcher suggests that a larger sample of teachers from a variety of middle schools be studied to test whether the conclusions drawn from this study remain stable. Most importantly, participants described the positive effects of implementing controversial young adult literature with passion, vigor, and enthusiasm.

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CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM

Context of the Problem

The content that is taught in a middle school language arts classroom can greatly affect the culture of that learning environment. Teachers of middle school language arts can feel pressured to focus on teaching reading strategies, grammar, and vocabulary as opposed to integrating young adult literature selections that may include controversial themes. Young adult literature, however, is the basis for many beneficial lessons and lively discussions in today's middle school language arts classrooms. When young adult literature is integrated into the classroom, students make interpretations about the characters' actions, thoughts, and choices and support their claims with arguments that draw on their understanding of the text and of human social behavior. In fact, literature is the starting place for student exploration of society and the social issues that influence their life (Busching & Slesinger, 2002). Young adult literature is filled with authentic dilemmas that capture the minds of middle school students and stimulate their interest to read. When students can talk about a common literary text with peers, they not only enjoy the literature, but also build interpretive skills, gain motivation to be lifelong readers, deepen their understanding of social issues embedded in the text, and learn to respect each other's views and opinions (Morocco & Hindin, 2002; Stover, 1996). Young adult literature can expand a middle school student's world, opening doors to new experiences and environments, to diverse cultures, to different lives and ways of living, and into the past.

Furthermore, literature for young adults often contains themes and plot lines that appeal to middle school students because it addresses concerns that are a part of their world, such as peer relationships, relationships with the opposite sex, substance abuse, sexuality, and independence. Thus, by its nature, young adult literature is often considered controversial or even inappropriate by some parents, teachers, and school officials (Elliot & Dupuis, 2002). It can be assumed that young adult literature can provide students with a degree of relevance and authenticity that other kinds of texts often fail to provide; however, for the purposes of this study, the young adult literature that is deemed controversial by authorities because of its inclusion on challenged or banned book lists will be referred to as controversial young adult literature (Huck, Kiefer, Helper, & Hickman, 2004; Stover, 1996). Some teachers would argue that because controversial young adult literature is filled with issues that young people can relate to, it can provide realistic scenarios, through its themes and conflicts, that capture the minds of students and allow them to make real-life connections between human social behavior and consequences (Enriquez, 2006). Through the integration of this literature in ways that invite students to identify with challenges faced by the characters in controversial books, middle school language arts classrooms can become a culture that promotes caring, respect, tolerance, and empathy. As a result of students reading this type of literature the theories of critical literacy emerge, encouraging readers to adopt a questioning stance and work toward changing themselves and their world while recognizing connections between one's life and the social structures that surround them (McDaniel, 2004).

Some teachers, on the other hand, fear the worst if they engage their students in discussions of controversial issues. Even if some teachers consider particular books as assets to their curriculum that would engage their students in deep, reflective response and conversation, they opt for safer titles, rationalizing that their students may not be able to handle the other material emotionally or psychologically (Creany, 1999). Educators may “self-censor” by avoiding selected controversial young adult novels in order to avoid objections or confrontations with parents, administrators, or school board members. They also might feel unprepared to guide their students in deep, reflective conversations (Freedman & Johnson, 2000).

Many teachers would agree that a necessary component of education is the development of a learning community that fosters empathy, compassion, respect, care, and commitment (Sergiovanni, 1999, 2004, 2005). Since schools are just smaller representations of our society, it is important for educators to promote a positive culture in their classrooms. Once a positive classroom culture is established, students will feel like they are a part of an integral and purposeful learning community. If educators foster a positive classroom culture, students are more likely to be motivated by altruism, to make commitments to one another’s success, and be dedicated to thinking, growing, and inquiring in a place where learning is an attitude as well as an activity—a way of life as well as a process (Sergiovanni, 1999). When teachers promote and establish a positive classroom culture, members of the learning community are tied together for mutual benefit and to pursue common goals by a sense of felt interdependence and mutual obligation. Sergiovanni further explains that through a positive classroom culture, economic, religious, cultural, ethnic, family, and other differences are brought together

into a mutually respectful whole. Most importantly, the culture of a classroom arises from a network of shared ideologies and a coherent set of beliefs that tie people together. These ideologies are the means by which we make sense of our lives, find direction, and commit ourselves to courses of action. They influence, as well, what students believe and how they behave. Classrooms of these shared ideologies represent a culture in which to build communities of kinship, place, and memory (Sergiovanni, 1999).

Readers of controversial young adult literature enter the lives of characters in books and explore diverse viewpoints, beliefs, emotions, motives, behaviors, and relationships. They develop understandings about human nature and gain insights about themselves and others (Moss, 2000). Equally important, teachers can create a classroom culture that is defined by the value of a multiplicity of ideas. Teachers and students can create a set of practices that enables readers to go beyond everyday discourse to literacy discourse tools for developing thoughtfully reasoned arguments and negotiated responses that are embedded in the classroom culture. Students learn that despite their academic, cultural, and linguistic diversity, they are all active members of a literacy-rich classroom community (Morocco & Hindin, 2002).

Through literature, students can be responsible for making their own connections and assessing their own learning. If readers relate to themes, characters, and plot events that are found in the novels to experiences in their own lives, controversial young adult literature can be used effectively to influence student engagement and motivation in the classroom which can contribute to a positive classroom culture (Leal, 1999). It has been claimed that a book can provide almost the same potential for influencing the reader as real people and, as a result, educators must be aware of the potential influence that

literary characters have on today's students (Leal, 1999). Through the themes found in controversial young adult literature, students are inspired to strategize ways to problem solve, deal with conflict, and overcome struggles. These skills are all necessary to create a classroom culture that emphasizes respect, tolerance and empathy (Mahar, 2001).

By integrating controversial young adult literature in their classroom, teachers can create a positive classroom culture and give the students the opportunity to experience deeper thinking, moral sensitivity, social awareness, and tolerance. Freedman and Johnson (2000) explained that in order to create a positive classroom climate, teachers must include literature in the curriculum that accurately—controversies and all—reflects the world in which students live. Controversial young adult novels can motivate students to take part in engaging discussions, react to real life situations through the characters and themes, and has the potential to encourage more compassion, respect, and empathy among students in the classroom.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the fact that there are many controversial young adult novels that can influence adolescents to read more, teach them to be more respectful in and out of the classroom, and encourage them to be critical evaluators of their own lives and learning, many of these novels have been banned in school districts across America or have been self-censored by teachers who feel that the subjects and themes are too risqué for middle school-aged students (Freedman & Johnson, 2000). Although some educators may feel apprehensive about integrating controversial young adult literature into their curricula, it is important that teachers learn the value of implementing these controversial selections into their curriculum as a way to not only provide higher-interest reading material to their

students, but also as a way to possibly alter the culture of their classroom (Enriquez, 2006).

This research will attempt to explore teachers' perceptions concerning their decision to incorporate controversial young adult literature into their classroom, how it affects the curriculum, and whether it changes classroom culture. This qualitative dissertation addresses the following questions:

1. How do teachers define classroom culture?
 - a. What metaphors and symbols will they use in these descriptions?
 - b. To what extent do aspects of critical literacy theory emerge from the teachers' perspectives on their classroom culture?
2. To what extent does the inclusion of controversial young adult literature selections influence classroom culture and the curriculum?
 - a. To what extent do teachers include this type of literature?
 - b. What curricular changes are made in order to integrate this type of literature?
3. How do teachers describe their classroom culture before and after they integrated controversial young adult literature into their classroom?

Significance of the Problem

During the past decade, schools and teachers have been encouraged to target the interests of students and to implement materials and subject matter that relate to their lives and the contemporary societies around them (Enriquez, 2006). Middle school students are sometimes regarded as being “stuck in the middle” between childhood and adolescence and can be considered a challenging group of students to educate based on

their struggles with identity, social pressures, and transitioning from one developmental stage to another (Enriquez, 2006). The integration of controversial young adult literature into the classroom can offer teachers a way to engage students with high-interest reading material and teach them life-lessons that can positively affect the classroom's culture (Leal, 1999). Since adult opinions can prevent students from reading these worthwhile texts by influencing school boards to ban specific controversial selections, it is important for educators to understand the benefits that teaching these novels can provide for their young adult students and the positive classroom culture that can result. Results from this study may encourage classroom teachers and administrators to support and be proponents of curricular change and critical pedagogy.

Definitions of Terms

Young Adults- Young adults are commonly defined as young people from the ages of 12 to 16 who are becoming aware of the problems facing them as they mature. They are becoming aware of the problems facing their friends, their families, and their communities (Elliot & Dupuis, 2002). For the purpose of this qualitative study, the researcher will be interviewing teachers of young adults in a middle school where ages will range from ages 10 to 15.

Young Adult Literature-Qualifies as literature that readers between grades 5 and 10 choose to read as opposed to what they may be required to read for class assignments such as classic works of literature. These novels usually include a young adult main character, realistic adolescent language, and themes and issues of importance and relevance to young adults (George & Stix, 2001).

Controversial Young Adult Literature-Young adult literature that includes topics

in which students are frequently interested, such as, war, drug and alcohol abuse, facing and dealing with sexuality, homosexuality, discrimination, racial and ethnic differences, violence, and suicide (Elliot & Dupuis, 2002). Encouraging students to read literature that highlights subjects that include prejudice, murder, abuse, poverty, divorce, teen pregnancy, and gang life may seem controversial or inappropriate to some parents, teachers, and school officials. However, reading a novel such as Ruby's *Skin Deep* (1994), about a young man who joins a gang of Skinheads, may help middle school students recognize that others have faced similar situations and decisions and that alternatives to violent options are available. Controversial young adult literature can provide a mirror in which middle school students can look at themselves and their world and can learn about themselves, about others, and about the nature of literature with a degree of relevance and authenticity that other kinds of texts often fail to provide (Huck et al., 2004; Stover, 1996).

Classroom Culture- Refers to the shared beliefs, values, roles, relationships, and responsibilities of a classroom environment (Sergiovanni, 1994).

Curricular Change- The process of altering a curriculum in order make a difference—to enable students to attain the school's, the society's, and, perhaps most importantly, their own aims and goals (Ornstein & Hunkins, 1998).

Critical Literacy- The ability to read the multiple layers of a text that focuses on its perspectives, assumptions, representations, and meanings in a social and historical context. The text is analyzed to determine who benefits from the situations represented in the literature and what the communication implies about

issues of social power and control (Semali & Pailliotet, 1999). It becomes a means of understanding one's own history or culture, to recognize connections between one's life and the social structures (Shannon, 1995). McDaniel (2004) explains that critical literacy encourages readers to adopt a questioning stance and work toward changing themselves and their world.

Theatre Promoting Young Adult Literature- Located in a large city, this theatre is nationally recognized as a venue that “brings literature to life.” According to their mission, they are committed to creating entertaining, educational, and enriching experiences that bridge the gap between children's theater and adult theater for middle and high school students, their families, and teachers. Most importantly, this playhouse produces, performs, and promotes plays derived from some of the most influential, controversial young adult works. Because education is a cornerstone of their mission and vision, this organization offers several unique programs for educators that encourage adolescents to attend the theatre, participate in the creative process, read the literature, and relate it to their own lives. This theatre not only offers learning for the teacher who wants to promote young adult literature in the classroom but also encourages teachers to share best practices, lessons, and strategies with other professionals while motivating teachers to be more responsive to students' needs. Presumably, many teachers attending this theatre's professional development workshops or belonging to their Adopt-a-School program would agree that the integration of controversial young adult literature into the language arts curriculum is beneficial to the middle school reader. This theatre has a commitment to providing educators professional

development workshops that promote integrating young adult literature selections into the classroom that may be considered controversial.

Theatre's Adopt-a-School Program-The theatre's Adopt-a-School Program, as explained on their website and as a part of their mission, is designed to help teachers in underserved districts in the region transform their reluctant and struggling adolescent students into students who can read, are motivated, and find value and enjoyment in a variety of literature. Participants are middle school classes from underserved neighborhoods, which have limited resources to provide new books and enriching literacy programs, along with having minimal opportunities to include multiple arts and theatre programs in the curriculum. They must also have PSSA Reading scores that need improvement and a stated need to improve their students' reading proficiency levels from the administration. Teachers must also agree to implement the literature, the interventions, and the field trips as designed by the theatre. Three schools are "adopted" each year for a term of two years. Each workshop at the schools focuses on specific strategies defined by the participating teachers and the theatre's education team. The teachers are observed and supported as they implement the strategies for their students. The students are engaged in outcome activities, which demonstrate their proficiency with the literacy strategies.

Limitations

The results of this study will not be generalizable to the larger educational population because of the small sample of cases that have been studied. In spite of triangulation with multiple forms of data (two forms of interviews and samples of student work), only eight teachers were involved in the focus groups and were invited to be a part of the individual interviews. Some of the research suggests that studying what the students themselves say about reading controversial young adult literature in the classrooms presents an opportunity to better assess the significance of teaching it (Enriquez, 2006). Although in this case only teachers' perspectives were studied, the sample of student work that these teachers shared provided insight into students' interest in the literature.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore practicing middle school teachers' perspectives on their decision to incorporate controversial young adult literature into their classroom, describe how their decision affects the curriculum, and reveal teachers' perceptions concerning the integration of this literature into their middle school classroom as a means to change or influence their classroom culture. The selected literature reviewed in this chapter establishes the connection between the study and current research. First, there is an overview of bibliotherapy and the ways this concept can influence young readers. Second, there is a summary of how the theory of critical literacy relates to the integration of young adult and controversial young adult literature in the middle school classroom. Third, there is a discussion relating to the effects of critical literacy and how the literature that is implemented in a curriculum can influence the culture of a middle school classroom. There is also a description of the characteristics of middle school readers and an examination of the ways the middle school language arts curriculum can be reshaped with literature. The chapter continues with a discussion of research on the teaching of young adult literature and controversial young adult literature and how it affects adolescent readers. Based on past studies, it is evident that there is need for a study that further explores teachers' perspectives on the implementation of controversial young adult literature into the middle school classroom (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Bean & Harper, 2006; Bean & Moni, 2003; Behrman, 2006; Kornfeld & Prothro, 2005; Lesley, 1997; Lewis & Fabos, 2000; McGregor, 2000; Morocco & Hindon, 2002; Rogers, 2002; Stevens, 2001; Tobin, 2000; Young, 2001; Wolk, 2009).

Furthermore, there is little research that has been conducted relating to the influence of controversial young adult literature on a classroom's culture.

Bibliotherapy and Young Readers

The philosopher Aristotle and others in Ancient Greece viewed literature as having healing effects and arousing emotions within a person. During this time, books became known as “medicine for the soul” since they were used to make people feel better. The research by Liz Brewster indicated that the U.S. Association of Hospital and Institution Libraries concludes that after reading fiction, some mental health patients improved. Brewster (2008) states, “Most literate people can mention at least one or two books which have affected them profoundly, which have expanded their potential for growth and development, and have provided not only instruction and knowledge but also understanding and inspiration” (p. 175). Similarly, there are a number of researchers who believe that teachers can use literature as bibliotherapy for adolescents who are at a greater risk of school failure because of social, economic, and family stress factors (Brewster, 2008; McMillen & Pehrsson, 2009; Prater, Johnstun, Dyches, & Johnstun, 2006).

Bibliotherapy is a concept relating to the use of books to help people with mental or physical challenges or to help people solve problems (Brewster, 2008, 2009; McMillen & Pehrsson, 2009; Prater, Johnstun, Dyches, & Johnstun, 2006). In addition, it can also be used to help people cope with personal problems, changes in their lives, or as a tool to promote change or personal growth. Prater et al. (2006) explain that bibliotherapy can also provide insights into problems, stimulate discussion about problems, create awareness that other people have similar problems, and in some cases provide solutions

to problems. Bryan (1939) discusses that the six objectives of bibliotherapy relate to: (1 showing the reader that they are not the first to have the problem, (2 permitting the reader to see that there may be more than one solution to their problem, (3 helping the reader to see the basic motivation of people involved in a particular situation, (4 helping the reader to see the values involved in experience in human terms, (5 providing facts needed for the solution of the problem, and (6 encouraging the reader to face their situation realistically. Because some of today's students are facing academic struggles, poverty, familial problems, and issues with drugs, violence, and sex, some theorists claim that bibliotherapy can positively influence middle school students (McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 2004). Through bibliotherapy, teachers can help increase a student's interest in reading, but, in addition, they can also assist students in learning more about themselves and encourage them to have a healthier mental outlook on life.

Critical Literacy Theory and Controversial Young Adult Literature in the Classroom

The theory of critical literacy has emerged from the work of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian philosopher, activist, and educator, who proposed a view of literacy as cultural politics in his 1987 book with Macedo entitled *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*. Freire stated that literacy should be considered “a set of practices that functions to either empower or disempower people” (p. 187) and should be critiqued in order to “reproduce existing social formations or serve as a set of cultural practices that promote democratic and emancipatory change” (p. viii). Critical literacy theory encourages readers to adopt a questioning stance and work toward changing themselves and their world while recognizing connections between one's life and the social structures that

surround them (McDaniel, 2004). The theory of critical literacy has also been defined as the ability to read the multiple layers of texts and communications presented in print or other media. Critical analysis of a text focuses on its perspectives, assumptions, representations, and meanings in a social and historical context. The text is analyzed to determine who benefits from the content as represented and what the communication implies about issues of social power and control (Semali & Pailliotet, 1999). Critical literacy also views text meaning-making as a process of social construction with a particularly critical eye toward elements of the various historical, social, and political contexts that permeate the foreground and discourse (Stevens & Bean, 2007). Wink (2000) believes that critical literacy not only involves reading and writing, but also knowing and seeing; it encourages the understanding of how and why knowledge and power are constructed and by whom and for whom. Shannon (1995) explained the importance of this theory in a classroom setting and states:

Critical perspectives push the definitions of literacy beyond traditional decoding or encoding of words in order to reproduce the meaning of text or society until it becomes a means for understanding one's own history and culture, to recognize connections between one's life and the social structure, to believe that change in one's life, and the lives of others and society are possible as well as desirable, and to act on this new knowledge in order to foster equal and just participation in all the decisions that affect and control our lives. (p. 83)

Furthermore, Stevens and Bean (2007) explained that over the past several years, studies have been conducted that analyzed the use of critical literacy in classrooms (Alvermann

et al., 1999; Lewis & Fabos, 2000; Stevens, 2001; Tobin, 2000; Young, 2001). For instance, students were engaging in class discussions relating to power, privilege, and oppression; the most crucial subjects in critical pedagogy (Stevens & Bean, 2007). Students and teachers worked to locate power and oppression in terms of race, class, gender, and other controversial issues that present themselves in classroom texts (Rogers, 2002). Morgan (1998) was quoted as stating, “Critical literacy teaching begins by problematising the culture and knowledges in the text—putting them up for grabs, critical debate, for weighing, judging, critiquing” (p. 157).

According to Wink (2000), critical pedagogy is to literacy as theory is to practice; they are “inseparable partners in schools” (p. 14). She continued by suggesting that teachers need to reflect critically on their own experiences and those of others in order to teach students to do the same. Therefore, Wink believes that students and teachers must continually challenge long-held assumptions, find new answers for new questions, grapple with multiple ways of knowing, and listen, learn, reflect, and act. Teachers and students alike, in a critical literacy classroom, must discuss the hidden curriculum, the unexpressed perpetuation of dominant culture through institutional processes. Critical pedagogy as well as the hidden curriculum asks: Whose standard? Whose culture? Whose knowledge? Whose history? Whose language? Whose perspective? (Wink, 2000). Wink stated, “Critical pedagogy seeks to make pluralism plural: standards, cultures, knowledges, histories, languages, perspectives. Society has a tendency to domesticate students into believing the dominant view” (p. 54).

Researchers agree that when embarking on using critical literacy in the classroom, it is important for teachers to choose texts that will encourage students to take a critical

stance toward that text, to question the voices heard in the text, to interpret who is represented in the text, to decide how characters are represented in the selection, and to analyze why the piece was written and the multiple meanings hidden in the literature (Brown & Saltman, 2005; Comber & Simpson, 2001; Harmon, 2002; Fehring & Green, 2001; Shannon, 1995; Stevens & Bean, 2007). When readers take this stance, “they develop a critical consciousness, fostering a search for justice and equity by reading the meanings behind the text. Questions about whose version of history is sanctioned, whose energy policy is supported by a text, or how the reader or characters in a novel are positioned by an author all fall within the realm of critical literacy” (Stevens & Bean, 2007, pp. 6-7).

When choosing texts to highlight critical literacy, teachers are cautioned to not assume that all literacy forms are equal in their use of power and agency. It is important for educators to remember: “In a democratic society, it is imperative that we critique texts with the rigor that will empower our students to be proficient, purposeful, and savvy consumers and producers of text” (Stevens & Bean, 2007, p. 11). Stevens and Bean suggested that teachers choose a meaningful text and address these types of questions and inquiry points: Who/what is represented in this text, who/what is absent or not represented, what is the author trying to accomplish with this text, for whom was this text written, who stands to benefit/be hurt from this text, how is language used in specific ways to convey ideas in this text, how do other texts/authors represent this idea, how could this text be rewritten to convey a different idea/representation?

Teachers of language arts agree that language, as a mediational tool, is a central component of learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). Critical literacy learning is a

socioculturally situated set of processes drawing on theories of learning that emphasize “that learning is mediated by language, that learning cannot be separated from its context, that learning occurs first on the social plane and then is internalized, and that learning involves more knowledgeable others, such as peers and adults” (Rogers, 2002, p. 3). Language; however, is not a neutral tool. Rather, it is a tool that possesses social, cultural, and ideological power that constructs and is constructed by daily learning interactions. Vygotsky (1978) explained that the zone of proximal development is a familiar solution for setting up learning conditions and Engestrom (1996) pointed out that there are three different interpretations of the zone of proximal development that may be useful for using critical literacy in the classroom. First, is the concept of problem solving from the known to the unknown. Second, it is the movement from spontaneous to scientific concepts or from the cultural known to unknown. Third, is the process of moving across the everyday actions of individuals to new forms of societal activity that can be collectively generated. In this process, the development of the individual performance represents a changing relationship between the self and the social world (Engestrom, 1996). Because of this, the classroom discussions between teachers and students about engaging texts can encourage teachers and students to learn and grow together and can promote an understanding of the world around them (Rogers, 2002).

Studies have shown the importance of exploring the use of critical literacy practices in the middle school classroom in order to teach students to read beyond the text. Research conducted by Rogers (2002) examined the results of literature discussion groups with adolescents over a two-year period. After observing discussions relating to selected controversial young adult texts, the researcher found that the students began to

make connections between their lives and the lives of the characters, they were identifying oppression as an institution and referred to examples in their own lives, they began to brainstorm ways to change their schools or communities for the better, and were analyzing multiple meanings of the texts and listening to the views and interpretations of others. In another study, Lesley (2001) found that by implementing critical literacy practices with students reading below grade level, they reconstructed their identities as readers, developed the skills to foster critical and analytical reading ability, and developed a metacognitive awareness about their reading processes. These developments would not have occurred if high-quality literature were not chosen, and constructivist lessons surrounding classroom discussions were not designed (Lesley, 2001). In an earlier study, Lesley (1997) explained that she learned her lesson after choosing a book for a critical literacy discussion that was not a good choice for her students. Although she had “introduced a non-cannonical, politically charged text designed to highlight social inequities” and allowed her students to “critique the larger society through sharing their lives,” (Bigelow, 1990, p. 437) she admitted that she was missing an equal representation of student voices that could have brought more meaning to the discussions. McGregor (2000) reported that in Queensland, Australia there has been a move towards “critical literacy across the curriculum.” This has involved students in second-guessing texts and analyzing their intents and social consequences in social studies, science, and math. While McGregor argued that critical literacy teaching practices in other disciplines can lead to unwarranted “talking back,” she believes that these techniques are beneficial to students; however, teachers must be trained and prepared in ways they can encourage students’ abilities, insights, and critical competencies.

Additional studies have been conducted with regard to the implementation of controversial young adult literature into a curriculum in order to promote critical literacy discussions in classrooms. Implementing young adult and even controversial young adult literature into middle school language arts classrooms can benefit a curriculum supporting critical literacy (Bean & Harper, 2006; Bean & Moni, 2003; Behrman, 2006; Kornfeld & Prothro, 2005; Lesley, 1997; McGregor, 2000; Morocco & Hindon; 2002; Rogers, 2002; Wolk, 2009). Langer (2001) found that English instruction in high-performing schools was characterized by the skills instruction in lessons where texts were deconstructed and discussed, collaboration among students experienced, and connections were made. For example, in one middle school class, students read *Night* (Wiesel, 1982) and had dynamic group discussions, wrote poetry, songs, and letters from different perspectives that critiqued the book's historical, ethical, and political issues. These reader response options and critical literacy activities engaged students and increased the depth of their learning (Bean & Moni, 2003).

Bean and Moni also described results from a study of middle school students who discussed the novel, *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* (Zusak, 2000). In this discussion to promote critical literacy, these researchers asked students questions relating to identity, subject and reader positioning, gaps and silences in the novel and different ways the characters' stories can be told. Students were able to discuss and explore how different positions can influence a reading of the events described. Role-play activities were completed so that students could place themselves in the position of the characters. Students also reported feeling empowered when they were making connections from the texts to their worlds (Bean & Moni, 2003). Bean and Harper (2006) concluded that young adult novels set in

sites of war, conflict, and civil unrest offer teachers and students a powerful resource for the critical discussion of global and national politics. These novels set in the context of militarization offer excellent perspectives from which to critically consider notions of freedom, democracy, and American society (Bean & Harper, 2006). These authors stated, “In light of intensifying international conflict and terrorism, such discussions are imperative.... We believe that literature study continues to be an important site for the discussion of complex and sensitive issues, and has the potential to provoke richer, more sophisticated thought and action” (Bean & Harper, 2006, p. 96). During discussions of *The Breadwinner* (Ellis, 2000), set in Afghanistan during Taliban rule, and *The Other Side of Truth* (Naidoo, 2000), which takes place in Nigeria, students discussed the issues in the novels while critically framing them in the historical and social context, positioning, and agency and power relations. The researcher did report that student reactions related to “how individuals are restricted by the definitions and assumptions of others; how freedom is understood, experienced, and secured in the novels and the world; and ultimately, what that might mean to us as individuals as a nation, and as global citizens” (Beans & Harper, 2006, p. 103). These discussions send messages to students about their own lives and the lives of others that might otherwise be ignored. Christensen (2000) agrees and stated, “When I taught literature without examining the social and historical framework, I condoned the biased social messages students absorbed” (p. 106).

Other experts have researched the use of young adult novels in critical literacy pedagogy that relates to texts about cultural bias (Bigelow, 2001), identity and the self (Janks, 2001), masculinity and homophobia (Martino, 2001), and sexual orientation

(Meixner, 2005; Swartz, 2005). Bean and Moni (2003) explained the importance of using high-interest young adult literature for critical literacy discussions:

Young adult fiction...changes how literature is taught and discussed in the classroom. Critical literacy shifts the boundaries of discussion between teacher and students, changes relationships, and generates substantive conversations about texts. The texts themselves become manipulable, transparent constructions that can be accepted or rejected, and in which multiple meanings are explored.... Literature becomes a representation of one worldview that may be questioned and for which alternatives may be provided. (p. 635)

Because they deal with issues that are relevant to teens, including racism, pregnancy, divorce, substance abuse, family conflicts, and political injustice, young adult and controversial young adult novels provide a roadmap for adolescents coping with these issues in real life. Adolescent readers view characters in these novels as living and wrestling with real problems close to their own life experiences. At the center of all of these themes, are questions of character identity and values. These themes lend themselves to exploration through a critical literacy framework (Bean & Moni, 2003).

Promoting Classroom Culture through Controversial Young Adult Literature

Christensen (2000) explained that to teach students to read and write and think critically about the “word and the world,” as Paulo Freire stated (Shor & Freire, 1987), means to engage them in a study of their lives in relation to the larger society. The classroom provides students the ideal opportunity for this engagement. Greene (1998) explained that the classroom structure allows dialogue between the self and others so that

the reinterpreting and rethinking of social reality can be forged—where space can be created for thinking and acting differently. In this ready-made community, students can critically examine concepts related to their worlds and beyond. A classroom should be a “realm of possibility—a place in which teachers and students together examine their lived experiences and envision ways to enhance their lives and sense of efficacy in the world around them” (Kornfeld & Prothro, 2005, pp. 218-219).

In order to provide an optimal learning community for their students, teachers need to properly build this community of learners by fostering a positive classroom culture that will motivate students to better relate to themselves, each other, and the world (Bock, 1997; Bulach, Lunenburg, & Potter, 2008; Erwin, 2004; Finnan, Schnepel, & Anderson, 2003; Gambrell, 1996; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000; Intrator, 2003; Khalsa, 2007; Levine, 2003; Mahar, 2001; Owen, 2007; Velliotis, 2008). Classroom culture refers to the shared beliefs, values, roles, relationships, and responsibilities of a classroom environment (Sergiovanni 1999, 2004, 2005). Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1990) noted that positive classroom culture supports each student’s need to belong, master his or her environment, develop his or her independence, and develop his or her generosity. Similarly, by promoting a sense of togetherness, members of a class will begin to feel a sense of belonging to a group and in turn, establish a class spirit (Bergin, 1999). With this, students who feel that they belong to a group have power in decision-making and have freedom of choices (Tunney, 1996). As a result, students should develop a process of understanding, sharing, compassion and empathy (David & Capraro, 2001). Therefore, a positive classroom culture provides each child with space to develop

specific capabilities and to experiences a sense of inner balance and wholeness in a community with others (Easton, 1997).

Although Finnán et al. (2003) believe that a classroom culture focuses on the shared beliefs, values, roles, relationships, and responsibilities of members of a classroom community, they have reported that other qualities teachers and students possess can influence the culture of a classroom. For example, most school reform models are designed to impact the classroom indirectly since the model most likely focuses on school culture. The underlying assumption is that changes in a school culture will “trickle down” to the classrooms. However, according to Finnán et al., in many cases, teachers may not be promoting a positive culture in their classrooms that reflect the school-wide belief system. These researchers found that classroom culture also relates to classroom dimensions, such as inclusive instruction, understanding students, mutual respect, involvement in learning, meaningful learning, authenticity, behavioral self-control, instruction as dialogue, active knowledge construction, cooperation, connectedness, empowerment, and diversity. It is reported that all of these dimensions are pertinent when attempting to “reculture” classrooms and schools (Finnan et al.).

If a teacher has built and promotes a positive classroom culture, the classroom will be a place where students feel emotionally and physically safe, where they feel supported, and where they feel enthusiastic about the discoveries each new school day will bring. It is a place where every individual is honored and where a sense of interdependence is built into the culture (Levin, 2003). He wrote,

This classroom is a place where a person feels most at home, free to be his or her own true self without fear of being judged, labeled, or excluded. In

this “house of belonging,” an individual’s unique life experience is embraced, celebrated, and treasured; to belong to the group does not mean giving up one’s individuality. The classroom community, if properly constructed, is also a house of belonging, and students thrive when exposed to the sense of security such a community can provide. (p. 6)

Levine went on and explained that it is a challenge of educators to facilitate this “supportive” presence in our classrooms, where kindness, compassion, generosity, and empathy must abound. Most of all, the culture of a classroom relates to the belief system of class community that provides the foundation upon which everything that goes on inside a classroom is situated.

Researchers have concluded that providing high-interest reading material for students can be a critical component in fostering a positive classroom culture (Behrman, 2006; Brown & Saltman, 2005; Christensen, 2000; Fehring & Green, 2001; Gambrell, 1996; Harmon, 2002; Intrator, 2003; Schein, 2008; Wolk, 2009). Fisher (2002) wrote, “literacy is one of the key tools for success in today’s world and also an unparalleled means of recreation and personal discovery” (p. 6). Not only is literacy a part of the construction of self, but it also affects participation in communities by building human relationships (Bakhtin, 1981). Busching & Slesinger (2002) concluded that literacy study and literature is the starting place for student exploration of society that brings to students the lives of other people and the conditions that affect these lives. In addition, Christensen (2000) discovered that by integrating high-interest reading material for her adolescent students and promoting critical literacy practices, her classroom culture was altered significantly. This curriculum of empathy that was created, led to a culture of

caring in her classroom that taught her students lessons that lasted them a lifetime.

Christensen stated,

As a critical teacher I encourage students to question everyday acts or ideas that they take for granted. But I also teach them to enter the lives of characters in literature, history, or real life that they might otherwise dismiss or misunderstand. I don't want their first reaction to difference to be laughter or withdrawal. I try to teach them how to empathize with people whose circumstance might be different from theirs. Empathy is the key to community building....We can teach students about Frederick Douglass...Rosa Parks—larger than life heroes who struggled to end slavery and injustice—but how do we teach them to stand up for the overweight girl sitting next to them in Algebra? How do we get them to accept the gay math teacher down the hall? How do we get them to stop teasing a child who does not speak English as a first language? (pp. 5-6, pp. 81-82)

Christensen continued by explaining that she chooses literature selections that intentionally makes students look beyond their world. For example, in one selected young adult novel, the author describes himself as feeling like an outcast in America. Her student later shared that he feels the same way, citing parallels between the ways in which Filipinos and African Americans both experienced discrimination, lynchings, and name-calling (Christensen, 2000). It is also stated that “students lend part of themselves to the stories as they read them: they become part of the world of the characters in the books, but their perceptions of that world are colored by their own experiences....they

emerge from the fictional worlds with a better understanding of their own” (Kornfeld & Prothro, 2005, p. 221). By putting students inside the lives of others, they begin to develop understanding about people in history, literature, or down the hallway, whose culture, race, gender, or sexual orientation differs from theirs. Christensen admits that this can be dangerous since students “call forth stereotypes that need to be unpacked” (p. 6). Some of her students shared, “Things changed for me this year. I started respecting my peers. My attitude has changed against homosexuals and whites. I learned about my own culture as an African American, but also about other people’s cultures. I never knew Asians suffered. When we wrote from different characters in movies and stories [sic], I learned how it felt to be like them” (p. 6). Many students have been silenced or marginalized and to combat this Christensen suggested,

Students need to learn about each other’s lives as well as reflect on their own. When they hear personal stories, classmates become real instead of cardboard stereotypes: rich White girl, basketball-addicted Black boy, brainy Asian. Once they’ve seen how people can hurt, once they’ve shared pain and laughter, they can’t so easily treat people as objects to be kicked, beaten, or called names. When students’ lives are taken off the margins and placed in the curriculum, they don’t feel the same need to put down someone else. (p. 6)

Intrator (2003) discussed student reactions to their classmate who made connections between his life and the lives of the characters in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain, 1884). After a student shared a family secret regarding sexual molestation, other classmates felt compelled to share their feelings. Students explained,

“I learned so much about everyone. I always thought...the others were kind of shallow, but now they seem deeper and we all seem closer....He really got the class to open up....It was a way for me to get things off my chest and share things with my classmates....people can say what they feel without being afraid” (Intrator, 2003, p. 56). These students came together by an elevated spirit of caring camaraderie, solidarity, and mutual affection. Most teachers would agree that good literature can be a catalyst to stir connections in and give meaning to students’ own lives, but it is really the text that creates the context for conversation in a classroom and the students, if the proper culture is created, are the catalysts that stir the connectedness (Intrator, 2003).

The discourse that is aroused in a classroom from young adult literature can greatly influence the culture of that classroom (Busching & Slesinger, 2002; Intrator, 2003; Schein, 2008). Probst (1988) agrees that the discussion of the text should reveal different responses, different senses of the work that might awaken readers to the uniqueness of the others in their class. He continued, “discussion that invites students to share the feelings aroused, the thoughts and ideas suggested, the interpretations proposed, the judgments offered, will inevitably reveal differences and similarities among the readers” (p. 25). That socializing effect, the understanding of one another, is surely one of the valid objectives for the instruction of literature (Probst, 1988).

Teaching with young adult literature is one of the best ways to shape human beings with intellectual curiosity, a caring heart, and a belief in the common good. Teachers can alter a classroom culture by turning books into experiences of authentic inquiry (Friedman, 2000; Wilhelm, 2007). Students and teachers can use books and their own opinions and experiences to create the “living curriculum” as a true community of

learners” (Wolk, 2009). Wolk noted that by the implementation of selected young adult texts in the curriculum, students can learn how to be more caring and empathetic, deal with social problems and social justice issues, become aware of multiculturalism, and global issues. More importantly, the culture of the classroom will begin to change for the better since the students will be able to make connections between the characters in the literature and the classmates sitting next to them. Noddings (1991) explained the importance of our schools teaching students the ability to care and how caring should be at the foundations of our curriculums. By making a culture of caring the prevailing culture within a classroom, the environment becomes one that is gentle, focused, challenging, and encouraging (Levine, 2003).

Wolk suggested that by integrating specific titles that encourage a classroom culture of caring, students could learn to better understand themselves while treating others around them more respectfully. Novels like *The Goats* (Cole, 1987), *Whirligig* (Fleischman, 1998), and *Stuck in Neutral* (Trueman, 2000) can encourage students to be more caring toward themselves and others. In *The Goats* (Cole, 1987), two campers who do not fit in with the others are the brunt of a prank and are banished to Goat Island. To the surprise of the campers, the two decide to disappear completely, but learn to depend on their own resourcefulness to survive and later teach the others a valuable lesson on ways to treat others. Furthermore, in *Whirligig*, Fleischman (1998) depicts a character whose life is transformed after killing a girl in an automobile accident. After fulfilling a request of the girl’s mother, the main character grows emotionally and learns to be more empathetic. Similarly, *Stuck in Neutral* (Trueman, 2000) portrays a character who has cerebral palsy. Although he cannot communicate and is severely handicapped, he is a

“secret genius” and is happy to be alive. Because he cannot communicate these thoughts with his father, his father is thinking of killing his own son. Readers learn, through the characters, that understanding and caring is key in any relationship. On the other hand, the young adult selections, *Buried Onions* (Soto, 1997), *Make Lemonade* (Wolff, 1993), and *Daniel Half Human* (Chotjewitz, 2005) depict young adults grappling with social justice and power issues. In *Buried Onions* (Soto, 1997), the protagonist tries to escape from the poverty and violence in his neighborhood and realizes that sometimes hard-work and determination will not pay off in the end. Wolff (1993), in *Make Lemonade*, highlights the desire of two main characters striving for a better life. While teaching readers important life lessons, characters struggle with parental love, sexual harassment, abuse and independence. Torn between loyalty to a best friend and pressure from Nazi leadership, the character in *Daniel Half-Human* (Chotjewitz, 2005) can encourage readers to analyze ethical dilemmas in society. While multiculturalism and homophobia is stressed in *Boy Meets Boy* (Levithan, 2003) and human trafficking is depicted in *Sold* (McCormick, 2006), students not only learn about the struggles of the main characters, but also learn more about themselves and who they want to become later on in life. By implementing these, and other young adult selections, teachers can help students learn to build a better classroom culture and a better world (Wolk, 2009).

If the generally accepted definition of learning is “a change in behavior,” then the teaching of literature can affect the day-to-day lives of students in a classroom community. Communicating the themes and developing skills to interpret texts that can influence lives can become essential to students as participants in a classroom democracy (Schein, 2008). Furthermore, Wolk (2009) believes that “teaching for social

responsibility with good books...redefines the purpose of school and empowers all of us—students, teachers, administrators, parents—to be better people and live more fulfilling lives. And in that process we create individuality and collectively, a more caring and thoughtful and democratic society. It all starts with a book.” (p. 672).

Although young adult selections encompass themes and lessons that are valuable to students of all ages, young adult literature is most important for middle-schoolers to read because they are at a unique stage in their lives.

Understanding Middle School Readers

Early adolescent, pre-adolescent, young adolescent, transescent, pubescent, and middle-schooler are just some of the labels given to students between the ages of eleven and sixteen. This group is just as hard to identify and quantify as it is to label. Every audience seeks a simple definition and real parameters for this group. Robinson (1998) stated that this age group is “adult in many ways, yet children at heart; independent, yet seeking guidance, support, and love; full of confidence, bravado, and spunk, yet shy and tentative inside, middle school students are a walking set of opposites.” (p. 3). Moreover, middle-schoolers usually claim individuality yet strive to look like, dress like, sound like all around them. They can also claim independence yet won’t go anywhere without their friends. When characterizing middle school students, Beers (2000) explained, “If you teach them, you love them and then can’t stand them. You find them to be mature and immature, responsible and irresponsible, childlike and adultlike, humorous and serious, spontaneous and methodical, respectful and irreverent. And that’s all within first period. The good class.” (p. 11). Teachers of middle-schoolers know that this group of adolescents presents some of the most challenging teaching situations any adult could

ever face-and some of the most rewarding. Those who discover that they do not have the patience, energy, or interest to teach these kids generally leave the middle school.

Therefore, at the middle level, we are left with some of the most dynamic, committed, and willing teachers (Beers, 2000).

Middle school students are extremely diverse in nature, which affects their needs at the middle school level. Physically, adolescence is the time of most change in the human body since birth and never again will the body change so rapidly. This rapid growth leads to awkwardness, some motor deficiencies, and restlessness that create problems with attention spans. Another obvious physical change is the onset of puberty that may cause erratic behavior, which is inconsistent at best. In other words, the middle-schooler can be adult-like one minute and child-like the next (Johnston, 2000).

Intellectual development also causes great change within each of these children.

Johnston explained that because of the low rate of growth in new brain cells, this age group learns more easily through concrete methods and listening seems to be the least efficient way of learning. Toward the end of middle school, these students begin using higher-order thinking skills as they develop into abstract thinkers. Middle school students also change socially and are influenced greatly by their peer group. At this time, social acceptance can become the predominant concern and can become the sole purpose of attending school. Often, students want to be a part of the inside group, but at the same time may want to maintain their own identity. As adolescents progress through these years, they begin to move away from the “I” centeredness of their lives to a more global perspective (Johnston, 2000; Robinson, 1998). Lastly, emotional development is another area of rapid change for this age group since these students are beginning to cope more

often with a wider variety of emotions. Their emotions can lead to conflicts as they attempt to deal with the world around them. Since some of these adolescents can lack confidence and can be often insecure, they need someone in whom they can confide, someone who will encourage their independence, but who will be able to give advice as they try to deal with life (Johnston, 2000; Robinson, 1998). Because of these changes, teachers must be careful to consider these aspects of adolescent development when choosing reading assignments and the activities that accompany them (Johnston, 2000).

Years have been spent researching the principal components in the education of adolescents: knowledge about their cognitive and affective needs, the function of interdisciplinary teaming, the contribution of educators creating a positive social-emotional learning environment for these students, and the development of sound teacher-preparation programs. Many scholars and teachers alike would agree that some of the most important research in education has been done in relation to adolescent literacy (Close & Ramsey, 2000).

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, literacy levels of middle school students in the United States have not improved over the past twenty years, and schools are being held accountable for students' growth are now obligated to look at the literacy development of all their students. Studies have been conducted in order to better understand and create middle school readers: who they are; why they read; why they don't; what they read; how to encourage reading; what they do when they can't read; and, perhaps most importantly, how to make reading more meaningful to students' lives (Beers & Samuels, 1998). The International Reading Association published a position statement framed by a list of guidelines that indicate what all adolescent literacy learners

deserve. Middle-schoolers need access to a variety of reading material that appeals to their interests, instruction that builds the skill and desire to read increasingly complex materials, and teachers who understand the complexities of individual adolescent readers (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999). In 2006, the National Council of Teachers of English created an additional list of guidelines that support adolescent learners which indicates that adolescent readers need experiences with high-interest texts and multiple perspectives, authentic, student-initiated discussions about text, experiences to reflect critically in their own literacy processes, and experiences examining texts and the themes in those texts critically. Just as important, the NCTE explains that teachers of middle schoolers need adequate reading materials that span difficulty levels and relate to students' lives and interests (National Council of Teachers of English, 2006).

Many teachers would agree that literacy is a foundational educational competency and a profoundly powerful way of knowing about the self and the world and moving from knowledge acquisition to taking meaningful action in the world. Most middle school students; however, do not share this view. Wilhelm (2000) explained that there are adolescents who simply resist reading and believe that it is "stupid" (p. 3). In order to understand the reading experiences of adolescents and to attempt to discover what makes these experiences meaningful or frustrating, Wilhelm conducted 500 interviews with middle school students and identified a variety of themes that emerged. The most salient themes that emerged from the interviews revolve around relevance, competence, and agency. These young readers just didn't understand how reading was relevant to their lives, how it spoke to their concerns, or how it might be useful to them, personally, as they make their way in the world. The middle-schoolers interviewed also indicate that

they don't feel that they are good at reading and that they would rather be doing something else (Wilhelm, 2007). Finally, the group explains that reading neither brings about or leads to any kind of real work or accomplishment. They conclude that reading is too passive and that they usually express their emotions and connections through action. Most adolescents define themselves by "doing stuff" and they believe that reading is "not a way of doing or making anything." (Wilhelm, 2000, p. 4). Wilhelm concluded that based on his study, students should still be encouraged to read; however, they will be taught to read in much more purposeful ways, in ways that will help them "forge connections to others and to higher human purposes" (p. 4).

Many middle school students have not yet been "hooked" on reading and don't enjoy meeting characters on a page, hearing a good story, or savoring an interesting plot. To connect these students to reading, teachers should expect that the process will take time and anticipate being a part of that process because convincing nonreaders to enjoy reading does not happen with reading kits, worksheets, drills, answering questions at the end of a story, filling in blanks on comprehension tests, or writing book reports. It happens by providing students meaningful pieces of literature that will interest them, offering them time to talk about what they have read, and by having peers share good books with them. Although these solutions alone will not transform all students into life-long readers, teachers who integrate high-quality literature into the curriculum can motivate middle schoolers to appreciate the written word (Beers & Samuels, 1998).

Reshaping the Middle School Language Arts Curriculum with Literature

The curriculum that is created and followed in most public middle schools across the country is aligned with standards and anchors that are included on the state

assessments. Teachers feel pressured to provide as much information to their students as possible in order to ensure that they know what is going to be on the test. Teachers end up lecturing so they can deliver the maximum amount of content. Tovani (2004) explained that the problem with this is that teachers end up doing most of the work. Students aren't given the opportunity to construct meaning. Tovani further noted that they might remember information for a multiple-choice test, but then they usually forget it. Tovani also indicated that most teachers become frustrated when students do not remember information that was previously taught, so they constantly feel as though they have to back up and reteach material. Usually, the textbook seems like the best solution for the teaching and reteaching of this material.

Sumara (2002) claimed that in most cases, the language arts curriculum centers around a textbook that is often above a student's grade level and inconsiderately written. Furthermore, concepts are introduced too quickly, too many vocabulary words are thrown at students, and students' background knowledge on the topic may be limited, so they have nothing to connect the new reading with. Sumara found that some teachers have gotten into the practice of assigning reading selections then creating tests to assess the ability of students to recall facts from the literature. This approach, he believes, defeats any chance of students finding enjoyment or meaningful experiences in literature. If students are to understand what they read and become life-long readers, teachers must find high-interest texts that they can read to supplement the textbook-as well as give them time to practice new strategies for understanding the reading during class (Beers, 2003; Tovani, 2004). Some researchers suggest that a curricular change needs to take place in order to make a difference in the education, and even in the lives of middle school

readers. Reshaping the middle school language arts curriculum by adding literature will offer students the chance to read about situations to which they can relate, construct meaning, and most likely, make connections that will lead to higher-level thinking strategies (Beers, 2003; Tovani, 2004). Furthermore, Fisher, Flood, & Lapp (2003) explained the importance of using literature in the classroom: “It is through literature that students learn about people they might never meet and places they may never visit in their lifetimes. Children must see themselves in books to affirm themselves, and must see others to expand their conception of the world” (p. 168).”

The purpose of using quality literature in the language arts curriculum first and foremost, according to Henn-Reinke and Chesner (2007), is to cultivate enjoyment and appreciation of reading and to make reading a lifelong habit. These authors also explained the importance of making connections to oneself through the text. Students may reflect on how similar or different the experiences of the characters in books are from their own. In addition, making connections to other texts is another reason integrating literature is beneficial. These text-to-text correlations make readers better consumers of what they read and they look beyond the text and see links to other books, characters, or plots. Students become critical readers and begin to expand their critical thinking skills. When students make connections to the world through the literature that they read, they are allowed to explore situations that are different from their own and they begin to draw conclusions about the diversity of others (Henn-Reinke & Chesner, 2007).

Researchers (Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1993; Moss, 2003; Rosenblatt, 1990; Roser & Keehn, 2002; Roser & Martinez, 2000) indicated that teachers should implement literature as a significant part of the language arts curriculum for at least three reasons:

modeling of language structures, connecting lessons to students' prior knowledge, and motivating readers. First, reading good literature encourages students to imitate language patterns and create their own academic or literary voice while providing students with an appreciation of different genres, styles, and perspectives. For example, while conducting a study in an upper elementary classroom, Fisher et al. (2003) found that students were using key words from the piece of literature *The Patchwork Quilt* (Flournoy, 1995) in order to create a classroom book about their grandparents. Students also used the words *maternal*, *paternal*, *immigration*, and *generations* when discussing the literature selections and when sharing stories about their own families' heritage. Next, literature can allow students to make connections and activate prior knowledge as an information source. Since all new knowledge is based on existing knowledge and the previous experiences of students are central to completing the cycle, it is important for teachers to encourage students to use information that they already know, so that they can make connections between what they already know and what they are learning from the literature (Fisher et al.). Lastly, literature motivates readers, especially when these readers see themselves living the life of a character. When students want to read, their attitude toward reading improves and a positive attitude toward reading usually results in more reading, and this, in turn, helps struggling students develop fluency while more advanced readers gain the confidence to read higher-level pieces of literature (Huck, et al., 1993; Moss, 2003; Rosenblatt, 1990; Roser & Keehn, 2002; Roser & Martinez, 2000). In the study done by Fisher et al., students' prior knowledge was activated when they were asked about their family traditions before they read the piece of literature and

students shared that they felt motivated and inspired to read more about the subject at hand.

The implementation of literature into the middle school language arts curriculum can also be beneficial to a student's oral and written language development. One way to promote the development of oral language skills in the classroom is for teachers to conduct discussions about literature and the theatrical performances based on pieces of literature (McDonald & Fisher, 2002; Worthy & Broaddus, 2002). Students should have the opportunity to talk and share their ideas in small and large group settings in order to enhance their speaking and listening skills. Similarly, the inclusion of literature into the language arts program can promote written language also by exposing students to a print-rich environment. As students hear, see, and use language, they can understand the connections between thoughts, words, and printed words. This interaction can improve their vocabulary, decoding, encoding skills and develops their writing strategies (Fisher, et al., 2003; Salus & Flood, 2003).

The adoption of a literature-based language arts curriculum can not only benefit a student's language learning skills, but also can enable readers to gain power. Galda (1998) explained, "There is a potential power that is inherent when reading literature, a power that comes from both book and reader. This power enables readers to transform words-on-a-page into emotional experiences that function as mirrors and windows into our lives and the lives of others" (p. 1). When studying readers of literature, Galda concluded that most readers experience a sense of engagement that is transactional, temporal, social, and cultural. This creative, transactional process involves readers in actively creating meaning from the words on the page. In other words, the content of any

book is not simply the words on the page, but those words infused with meaning by their readers, meaning that reflects the various experience and knowledge that readers bring to their reading (Rosenblatt, 1978). Reading literature is also temporal since the story read occurs over time and readers picture characters, and events, anticipate actions, think back over what was read, identify with characters, and make the virtual experience we are shaping, part of our lives (Galda, 1998). In addition, reading is also social and cultural and allows students to gain meaning from their own unique, situated experience. While it can be viewed as an individual activity, reading can be intensely social and can promote shared meaning. Although Hade (1993) denoted that the four reasons for the creation of a literature-based middle school language arts curriculum are to promote reading, develop literary knowledge, self-understanding, and social responsibility, Galda believes that the potential for powerful engagements that books provide should be added to that list.

A literature-based language arts curriculum, according to Probst (1988), should allow students to gain more knowledge of themselves, of others, the various forms of texts, the context of the world, the meaning-making process, and the ability to gain pleasure from the material. The curriculum should also support the uniqueness of individual response, the developmental characteristics of adolescence, and the patterns of reading interest during those years, as well as the literary heritage. Reading literature can be meaningful, attainable, and enjoyable and by reshaping the language arts curriculum by the implementation of literature, a student's motivation to read can be revitalized; however, it is important to integrate appropriate literature into the curriculum in order for middle-schoolers to become successful readers and critical learners in the world (Beers, 2003).

The Teaching of Young Adult Literature and its Effect on Middle School Readers

Choosing the types of books to use in a literature-based middle school language arts curriculum is an important task of any teacher, administrator, or school board member. Fisher et al. (2003) suggested selecting literature that is “representative of the full range of human experience found in our world.” (p. 177). Stover (1996) expressed that young adult literature should be at the heart of the middle school curriculum, as this rapidly expanding body of literature provides the motivation necessary for struggling and reluctant readers to want to read. Indeed, a number of scholars in the fields of English and literacy education have argued that young adult literature is crucial in literacy and language arts programs for all adolescents (Blasingame, 2007; Brown & Stephens, 1998; Elliot & Dupuis, 2002; George, 1998; Glasgow, 2001; Henn-Reinke & Chesner, 2007; Hipple, 1992; Joseph, 1998; Kaywell, 2000; Rice, 2006; Soter, 1999; Sullivan, 2002). Furthermore, Sullivan (2002) noted that young adult novels are books every adolescent, struggling reader or not, should read because these novels are valuable tools for helping teenagers to understand themselves and to see their place in the world that is far different from the one in which their teachers or parents grew up.

Young adult literature qualifies as literature that readers between grades 5 and 10 choose to read as opposed to what they may be required to read for class assignments such as classic works of literature. These novels usually include a young adult main character, realistic adolescent language, and themes and issues of importance and relevance to young adults (George & Stix, 2001). Stover (1996) contended that young adult literature reflects the complexity of the society out of which it is produced; its themes are of importance to adolescents, and the issues with which the characters wrestle

are of significance in our ever-changing world. This genre of literature is popular with students, and therefore is an effective teaching tool, because it deals with issues and problems that confront students as they approach and live through adolescence. It deals with issues that have been described as “growing up” problems, some of which have been part of literature for a long time (Elliot & Dupuis, 2002). Young adult literature became popular in the late 1960’s with the publication of landmark titles like *The Outsiders*, *The Chocolate War*, and *The Pigman*. Authors like Walter Dean Myers and Richard Peck helped define this genre as a body of high-quality literature worthy of serious study. Although it has been over 30 years since its birth and there is a vast canon of distinguished fiction and nonfiction for young adults, this type of literature is still marginalized in the publishing industry. It gets little attention from *The New York Times Book Review*; however, the National Book Awards recognized young adult novels and the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prizes now includes a young adult fiction category. The American Library Association’s Best Books for Young Adults and the Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature also help in distinguishing the best that is being published for this age group (Sullivan, 2002).

Because of their developmental needs, Blasingame (2007) believes that young adult selections are the best choices for middle school readers. Developmental psychologists Kohlberg and Erickson both theorized that because of the physical, emotional, psychological, moral, and personality development that takes place during adolescence, these teens are going through great transitional periods. In *Essays of Moral Development* the stages in which human beings form consciences are described and how these consciences operate and change as children mature (Kohlberg, 1981). Erikson

(1950) explained in *Childhood and Society* the eight stages of human development and how there are tensions between two polar opposite states of psychological development. In stage 5, 12-18 years of age, teens ask the question, Who am I? At this time, middle school students may be experiencing an identity crisis, determining their own personal beliefs, values, and roles in life such as gender and social roles. Young adult literature can enable these readers to "...experiment safely and vicariously through the trials and tribulations of characters like them. Far better that when a young reader encounters a certain life-changing decision or dilemma for the very first time, it is in a book, rather than in real life." (Blasingame, 2007, p. 140).

Many researchers believe that young adult literature should be the focus of the middle school curriculum for a variety of reasons. Blasingame (2007) explained that "exemplary literature for young adults becomes something very special when the readers interfaces with it; it becomes a sort of user's guide to life, a guide with great influence over how the reader grows as a human being" (p. 138). He continued with five principles that depict the kinds of books that young adults need in their lives. The genre of young adult literature fulfills many of the needs of the adolescent in a variety of ways and offers middle school students an understanding about themselves and the world around them. The research pertaining to the reasons why young adult literature is beneficial to middle school students is consistent with Blasingame's five principles concerning the types of books that young adults need to read. Blasingame indicates that adolescents should be given the opportunity to read books (1 about characters to whom they can relate, (2 that depict issues that they might be facing, (3 that are accessible, interesting, well-written, and appropriately matched to a student's level, (4 that relate to the diversity of an

adolescent's word and expand their view of the world, (5 and that helps them make sense of their world and understand human behavior.

The first principle denotes that young adults are interested in reading about characters to whom they can relate—people of similar ages, facing similar problems. For example, many researchers suggest that middle school students can benefit from reading young adult literature because they can relate to the characters and situations featured in the text (Beers, 2003; Blasingame, 2007; Brown & Stephens, 1998; Elliott & Dupuis, 2002; Henn-Reinke & Chesner, 2007; Joseph, 1998; Rycik & Irvin, 2001; Stover, 1996; Sullivan, 2002). For instance, Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet* series and Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* have contrasting settings and conflicts, but their main characters are similar in many ways. The main character in Paulsen's book is spending time trying to survive in the Canadian wilderness, while the protagonist in *Speak* is dealing with the consequences of a rape that she is keeping a secret. Both characters feel alone and hopeless without power and purpose. Living in a sometimes hostile environment, feeling alone, and different from everyone else is a commonality among young adults, and books with characters who also experience these feeling are helpful to them (Blasingame, 2007). Blasingame (2007) wrote, "As readers follow the ups and downs of characters much like themselves, they wrestle with the protagonist's issues side-by-side with him or her. These issues may be as innocuous as working up the nerve to ask someone on a date, or as heart wrenching as helplessly watching as a terminally ill family member declines." (p. 141).

Similarly, other researchers have stressed the importance of readers making connections between themselves and the text as a way to build comprehension and

appreciation for what they are reading so that they can see how the literature relates to an understanding of life (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Henn-Reinke & Chesner, 2007; Rycik & Irvin, 2001; Sullivan, 2002). Young adult literature has the potential to guide students to reflect on who they are and how they live their lives by reading about the characters' experiences. Sometimes they realize that characters act in the same way as they do or possess the same traits, and other times they reflect on how different their experiences are or how different they are from the characters (Henn-Reinke & Chesner, 2007). By them making these connections, middle-schoolers may feel less isolated. Crutcher (1992) explained, "Stories can help teenagers look at their feelings or come to emotional resolution, from a safe distance....I have never met a depressed person, or an anxious person, or a fearful person who was not encouraged by the knowledge that others feel the same way they do. 'I am not alone' is a powerful medicine" (p. 39).

The second principle of exemplary young adult books relates to the inclusion of the issues in these novels that adolescents may be facing. The authors of these texts ensure that these issues are treated respectfully. For example, Sonnenblick, author of *Drums*, understands the need for authenticity and accuracy and states, "It needed to be perfect. A very special reader was trusting me to tell the truth, and when someone hands you a ball of their trust, you don't drop the ball" (Blasingame, 2007, p. 141). This author completed research on cancer and worked with oncologists to find out information about cancer symptoms, medicines, side effects, and treatments. Good young adult authors display the utmost respect for their readers as they present issues that can relate to those that their audience can be experiencing (Blasingame, 2007). This type of literature reflects the complexity of the society out of which it is produced; its themes are of

importance to the middle-schoolers reading them, and the issues with which the characters wrestle are of significance in our ever-changing world (Stover, 1996). Carlsen (1980) found that young adults are more likely to enjoy the same kinds of texts than the differences in their backgrounds, reading skills, and school achievements might otherwise indicate. These students connect to the readings based on the issues presented in the plots. Therefore, Carlsen suggested caution in forcing able young adults to read adult literature that may be comprehensible to them on a literal level but to which they have little emotional and psychological connection. When middle school students read literature that presents issues to which they do not relate, these readers lose a sense of excitement and enthusiasm for reading and may cause them to view it as a school-based chore. Most middle-schoolers choose books based on their interest in the subject matter and the issues faced by the characters as opposed to its literary merits. The independence of the characters and their abilities to overcome difficult situations provides them with hope that they, too can learn to cope with the problems that being an adolescent carries with it (Stover, 1996).

Because middle school students are facing issues relating to racism, sexism, classism, poverty, drugs, violence, death, family conflicts, and social pressures, it is important that the literature that they read features these issues so that students can explore subject matter that is more relevant to their lives. Adolescence is a unique time in which students are at the crossroads between childhood and adulthood and could be challenged through literature to seek real solutions to real problems that transcend traditional content-area boundaries (Stover, 1996). Furthermore, Probst (1986) explained that young adult literature will awaken students to differences, and will compel them to

engage with the text creatively. He continued and stated, “If middle school readers encounter literature that deals with issues that are significant to them, they are more likely to learn how the characters’ trials and tribulations can affect their own lives and therefore stimulating the effort to ‘actualize’ or make meaning out of the text” (p. 35).

Another principle concerning young adult literature relates to the accessibility of these types of texts. Most “accessible” young adult texts are interesting, well-written, and appropriately matched to the levels of the students (Tovani, 2004). None of the benefits that young adult literature holds in store for readers are available to them if they cannot or will not read it. Material is not “low level” or “dumbed down” and does not lower standards of rigor. The intention is to give students reading material that is worthy of their time, something that they actually have the potential to understand, and finding a piece of text that will excite them about content material (Beers, 2003; Blasingame, 2007; Rycik & Irvin, 2001; Sullivan, 2002; Tovani, 2004). In interviews with middle school students, Beers (2003) learned that students want to read books that are not overwhelmingly long, do not have extremely complicated plots, include a limited amount of characters, but tackle mature subject matter. One student explained, “If I am going to read, it needs to be something that’s like important to me, something that really matters, you know, can really change your life” (Beers, 2003, p. 283). Another student explained, “If I am going to read, it better be for a good reason, like to teach you something. Not like a history book. Who cares what’s in there? All that stuff is like two thousand years old. I mean it’s gotta help me...right now” (Beers, 2003, p. 283). Because of these responses, researchers suggested providing students access to books that are of high-interest, but are written at a variety of reading levels, series books, which maintain the

same characters and setting from book to book, graphic novels, with storyboard graphics that accompany the text, and topics that centered on a common theme (Beers, 2003; Blasingame, 2007; Rycik & Irvin, 2001; Sullivan, 2002; Tovani, 2004). In addition, researchers agree that most young adults seek books that do not have very long chapters, so that the plots “move quickly,” have well-defined characters, include plenty of action that begins right away, feature characters who face tough choices, and are written with realistic language (Beers, 2003; Blasingame, 2007; Rycik & Irvin, 2001; Sullivan, 2002; Tovani, 2004). For example, Blasingame (2007) explained that the Bluford series, comprised of thirteen books, is one of the most successful book series for teen readers. These plots revolve around the lives of students at an urban school with a primarily African American and Latino student body. Not only should young adult literature selections be meaningful, authentic, relevant, and engaging, but they also need to be understandable, readable, and accessible to students.

Many English or language arts teachers are determined to make their students read “real” literature and introduce them to authors like Austen, Dickens, and Twain; however, when faced with these texts, some students become impassive, and overwhelmed by the reading level, vocabulary, and sentence structures of these selections. Teachers can become disillusioned and begin to question their own skills and abilities to inspire students. In actuality, these classic pieces of literature are not “accessible” to many middle-schoolers and many of these students do not have strong backgrounds in reading (Santoli & Wagner, 2004). There is evidence that young adult literature can be a vehicle that allows teachers to present the same literary elements found in the classics while engaging adolescent students in stimulating classroom discussions

and assignments. Unlike classic literature, it can foster a desire in students to read and therefore, deserves a valued and respected position in language arts classrooms (Santoli & Wagner, 2004).

The fourth principle that Blasingame (2007) and other researchers have conveyed relates to how young adult literature can reflect the diversity of an adolescent's world and expand their view of the world (Brown & Stephens, 1998; Hansen, 1998; Henn-Reinke & Chesner, 2007; Samuels, 2002). The Census Bureau projects that the nation's population will more than double in the next 100 years, fueled by the gain of as many as one million immigrants a year (Samuels, 2002). Not only will classrooms become more diverse, but with giant leaps in technology, society is becoming more global. Young adult literature provides opportunity for teachers to help students develop understanding and compassion by representing their own cultures as well as exposing them to the cultures of their fellow classmates (Henn-Reinke & Chesner, 2007; Samuels, 2002).

Adolescents need to read books that reflect the diversity of who they are, see themselves in their reading, and see the total diversity of the human race in their reading as well. When adolescents do not see themselves in their reading, they are likely to infer, consciously or subconsciously, that they do not count or matter. It is imperative that when choosing young adult selections, teachers are conscious of ensuring that a variety of cultures and backgrounds are represented (Brown & Stephens, 1998; Hansen, 1998; Henn-Reinke & Chesner, 2007; Samuels, 2002). Native American literacy researcher Marlinda White-Kaulaity expressed the consequences suffered by young readers who never see their own ethnic or cultural heritage reflected in their classroom reading. She states that "when voices are excluded...teachers deprive young readers of one purpose of

literature: to read and learn about themselves and others in life” (2006, p. 8). While choosing pieces of literature that omit specific cultures can be detrimental, it is also important that texts that are provided for students to read do not stereotype members of an ethnic group as being all alike. These representations, simplistically depicting group members in a positive or negative way, further marginalize the group and sends inaccurate messages to students (Blasingame, 2007). Blasingame stated, “Literature must show us in full complexity, and that includes flaws and, in some cases, perspectives that might make others uncomfortable.” (p. 142). For example, Gary Soto, who often writes young adult literature about Latino teens, is especially adept as showing people in their full complexity. He creates characters who are as complex as their counterparts in the real world, an important quality for young readers who are beginning to understand that people are generally neither all bad nor all anything, but are, instead, complex and not always easy to understand (Blasingame, 2007). Students may carry assumptions about people that are often stereotypes that result from a lack of adequate information. Multiple literacy experiences in literature with children and adults from a variety of backgrounds enhance a student’s overall literacy development as it expands their worldview. Providing students with opportunities to discuss individual differences based on literacy experiences offers them new insights about people who are different than themselves. Discussing literature that relates to diversity allows students to look inward to examine their values, beliefs, and behaviors (Fisher et al., 2003).

Despite the civility of most researchers on this topic who believe that a variety of cultures should be represented in young adult literature, some scholars believe that the debate is still not over (Brown & Stephens, 1998). Some scholars believe that literature

for our young people should promote cultural assimilation, while others believe that the themes of the literature should emphasize individual cultural identity. It is also argued that young adult authors should not write about cultures that are not their own and that they should confine themselves to “what they know best” (Brown & Stephens, 1998). Samuels (2002) quotes playwright August Wilson who said, “Someone who does not share the specifics of a culture remains an outsider, no matter how astute a student or how well-meaning their intentions (p. 47). On the other hand, Samuels expressed the views of African American studies expert Henry Lewis Gates, Jr. who states, “No human culture is inaccessible to someone who makes the effort to understand, to learn, to inhabit another world” (p. 47). Although there are differences of opinions, all of those concerned with literature for young people agree about the importance of reading about people like themselves to help them develop self-esteem, enlightenment, and understanding. At the same time, literature also helps free students from the stereotypes about those whose backgrounds are different from their own (Samuels, 2002).

Although perspectives from diverse cultural heritages are important in young adult literature selections, so are perspectives relating to individuals who all too often receive negative attention or no attention at all. In other words, students who read about themes concerning characters who suffer from a physical or mental disability can reflect the real-life situations that some adolescents can be experiencing. For example, Jack Gantos wrote young adult novels that highlight the experiences of his protagonist, Joey Pigza, who has attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. This character does not judge those around him and tries to make the world a better place for everyone (Blasingame, 2007). Like ADHD, depression is also a theme highlighted in young adult selections. In

Damage, by A.M. Jenkins (2001), the main character is secretly suffering from depression and suicidal impulses caused by a chemical imbalance. Ultimately, this character accepts who he is and must learn to love himself enough to seek help. Traditionally, books that portray individuals who have disabilities show those characters in a negative or unattractive light. To succeed with adolescent readers, young adult literature concerning disabilities must present information, topics, themes, and questions in ways that are not didactic, condescending, or pedantic (Rosenblum & Carroll, 2000). Heim (1994) established five criteria on which to evaluate books that depict mentally or physically disabled characters. Information in the text must be accurate, including the use of correct terminology, books should provide an insight into life of the person with the disability and stereotypes should be avoided, the book should be written well, confront the disability in a realistic manner, and the book should avoid simply using a character who is disabled to promote the growth of a nondisabled character. Rather, the character with the disability should experience growth himself or herself (Rosenblum & Carroll, 2000). Students who are experiencing similar trials can connect with these characters and can be positively inspired by them (Blasingame, 2007; Brown & Stephens, 1998; Hansen, 1998; Henn-Reinke & Chesner, 2007; Samuels, 2002).

Young readers not only need to read about characters like themselves, but also about characters who are different. Overall, young adult literature has the qualities of helping middle-schoolers grow to understand the world they live in and all its peoples (Blasingame, 2007; Brown & Stephens, 1998; Hansen, 1998; Henn-Reinke & Chesner, 2007; Samuels, 2002). As White-Kaulaity explained, all young readers, from all walks of life “need cross boundary knowledge, interaction, and experiences to live in an

interdependent world. Literature can help achieve such goals.” (p. 10). Researcher Michael Cart (2006) explained,

Literature teaches empathy, tolerance, and respect for the dignity and worth of every human being....Fiction gives us not only an external view of another life, however, but an internal one, as well, through its empathetic immediacy, the emotional rapport that it offers the reader; it enables us, in short, to eavesdrop on someone else’s heart. Yes we can get statistical profile of the adolescent problem drinker from a report in *Time* magazine, but to emotionally comprehend the problem, to understand how it feels to be trapped in that skin, we turn to Robert Cormier and his novel, *We All Fall Down*....To understand the emotional plight of impoverished, single-parent families, we look to Virginia Euwer Wolff’s *Make Lemonade*. (p. 269)

Young adult literature has great power to put a middle school reader in the place of the characters in ways that touch emotions, values, and beliefs and teachers who are committed to expanding the horizons of their students strive to build well-rounded collections of young adult literature that represent a wide range of experience, cultures, and perspectives.

The last principle explains that young adult books help middle school students make sense of their world and understand human social behavior (Blasingame, 2007). As Frances Ann Day (1997) explained, “Without a complete vision of all that it means to be human, we live impoverished and isolated lives. Fortunately, the world of literature for teenagers is gradually being transformed to embrace the wondrous complexity and depth

of the human experience” (p. 3). Beyond knowing more about the world through reading, analysis of what has been read can help students expand their views of events and lifestyles. It may lead them to understand actions that are different than their own and may be more likely to suspend judgment when encountering different points of view or different ways of living because they have learned that they need to more fully understand the social and cultural values represented by the actions of others. In other words, reading may go a long way to help students develop tolerance for differences (Henn-Reinke & Chesner, 2007; Stover, 1996).

Differing points of view can also be explored in young adult literature, providing students with greater insights into why people might develop differences of opinion; however, differing points of views can lead to conflict and confrontation. When Stover (1996) surveyed 339 middle school students on transdisciplinary thematic concepts, they rated their interest in the unit on “conflict” very highly and it received a mean score of 4.6941 on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 as the highest level of potential interest. Conflict is an integral part of daily life and a concern that crosses cultural, gender, age boundaries. According to Stover, dealing with conflict is a survival skill that middle school students are beginning to learn; however, most of them are in a constant state of conflict. Stover wrote, “Their emotions pull them internally in a thousand directions at once. They squabble with their peers, they argue with their parents, they rebel against the authority of their teachers, and they view with dismay the proof that adults cannot seem to find ways for countries of the world to live in peace.” (p. 48). As they define themselves and their individual identity, they must also deal with internal conflicts about their values, morals, and ethics. Through the integration of young adult literature in the classroom, middle

school students are capable of examining the ways in which characters resolve conflicts and explore alternative responses to conflict situations, which may result in positively influencing students' lives (Stover, 1996).

Although a number of scholars have argued that young adult literature is crucial in a middle school language arts program, Applebee (1993) and Bushman (1996) have found that young adult literature often is not being thoroughly integrated into the middle school curriculum. Professional development efforts in the middle grades must focus on the meaningful integration of young adult literature and innovative instructional strategies for effecting that integration (George, 2002). In a 2002 study, research was conducted in a diverse, Manhattan public middle school in order to explore the use of faculty book clubs as a means to introduce middle school teachers to acclaimed adolescent literature in hopes that they might incorporate the books they read into their language arts and social studies classes. After implementing survey questionnaires, interviews, and informal observations before and after the faculty book club and analyzing the data collected, it was found that the teachers were enthusiastic about the selections that they read and were influenced to incorporate these some of the titles in their classrooms. By the end of the first semester, the text sets of adolescent novels available to teachers had more than tripled from the beginning of the year and the social studies teachers set up their own departmental adolescent literature book room, which currently has over seventy titles (George, 2002). George also reported that in a relatively short time, at least five teachers made curricular and pedagogical changes that have created a sense of community, allowed students and teachers to engage in meaningful literacy activities together, and altered teachers' attitudes and practices have changed students' reading behavior for the

better (2002). Although many researchers and teachers believe that young adult literature is important to integrate into the curriculum, not all young adult literature is considered controversial. Because this genre of literature often reflects the lives of the readers, most young adult and controversial young adult selections often include themes of love, friendship, family, conflict, self-discovery, and ways in which adolescents come-of-age and grow into adulthood.

The Effect of Controversial Young Adult Literature on Middle School Readers

Literature for young adults often contains themes and plot lines that appeal to middle school students because it addresses concerns that are a part of their world. Thus, by its nature, young adult literature is often considered controversial or even objectionable to some parents, teachers, and school officials (Elliot & Dupuis, 2002). Controversial young adult literature includes topics in which students are frequently interested, such as, war, drug and alcohol abuse, facing and dealing with peer relationships, relationships with the opposite sex, sexuality, homosexuality, substance abuse, discrimination, racial and ethnic differences, independence, violence, and suicide (Bodart, 2006; Carey-Webb, 2001; Elliot & Dupuis, 2002; Galda, 1998; Karolides, Bald, & Sova, 2005; Karolides, 2002; Reid, 1999, Sullivan, 2002). Encouraging students to read literature that highlights subjects that also include murder, abuse, poverty, divorce, teen pregnancy, and gang life may seem controversial or inappropriate to some parents, teachers, librarians and school officials. Students in the middle years often “drop out” or “turn off” to reading because of the decisions some adults make about young people’s reading. Librarians, parents, teachers, and school boards and administrators can share complicity in turning many kids off to reading and on to lifelong aliteracy by attempting

to control what students read and making educational decisions without keeping the interests of the students in mind (Reed, 1994). Reed further explained,

Young readers are required by schools or pushed by parents to read books for which they are not emotionally or physically ready. Many young adults have difficulty finding books with young characters who face the problems of adolescence. Conversely, adolescents are gaining emotional and intellectual maturity, but the books they are reading are not keeping up with their maturity, and they do not know how to locate more appropriate books....Some adults discourage adolescents from selecting books on certain topics or themes of interest. (p. 25)

Worthy, Moorman, and Turner (1999), reported that the types of reading materials students will find of most interest are not readily available in their school libraries, in classroom collections, or implemented in the language arts curriculum. Several causes of limited availability or use are cited: self-censorship on the part of librarians and teachers who object to materials they perceive to be graphic in sexual or violent content; lack of funding for “popular” materials; lack of durability and short “shelf life” of such materials; teacher fear of integrating books that parents, school administration, or school boards would disapprove of; and the perception that popular reading materials are inappropriate for classroom and school library collections.

Another obstacle is the lack of knowledge among teachers about young adult and controversial young adult literature. Many teachers education programs still do not require any course work on these topics for students seeking secondary teaching certifications and there is little in-service teacher training on these types of literature

(Sullivan, 2002). Teachers need to make available to their students' choices that make sense. As Moniuszko stated, "When given the opportunity to read about relevant subjects that they value, controversial or not, students will choose to read and be more apt to become lifelong readers" (1992, p. 34). Books for young adults have become more controversial, bleak, and dark because they mirror the changes in our society and in our world (Bodart, 2006). Furthermore, Bodart (2006) argued that controversial young adult literature should be made available to students in school since "today's teens already know about violence, drugs, and sex, death, divorce, conflict, homelessness, bullies, prejudice, rejection, and hatred. Many of them know how controversial our society has become; it is their truth, their life and they demand that this truth, this life, be reflected in the books they read" (p. 32).

Challenges and censorship are prominent issues relating to the teaching of controversial young adult literature, especially when the goal of some teachers is to engage middle-schoolers in books in a significant way so that they will want to read, think, talk about them, and learn from them (Bodart, 2006; Carey-Webb, 2001; Galda, 1998; Karolides, Bald, & Sova, 2005; Karolides, 2002; Reid, 1999, Sullivan, 2002). Books powerful enough to engage adolescents are the same books that are likely to enrage censors. What a story is about—ideas that propel the author to write it and that readers generate while reading it—and how it is written make a difference in the connections that readers make with the story (Galda, 1998). A plot line with power can generate powerful, heartfelt responses. A story with power can allow an engagement that lingers over time, and some believe, can be potentially dangerous, and can get the reader into trouble or allow the reader to begin thinking about issues that are against the norm.

This potential for trouble, challenges and censorship, has to do with the transforming power of stories. It is just this potential for transformation, the power that experiences with stories have to change lives, to make readers see, feel, and live a little differently, that makes literature so wonderful and dangerous at the same time. Galda discussed how powerful literature is:

Have you ever wondered why women weren't taught to read but men were? Why slave owners were forbidden to teach their slaves to read? Reading brings power to those who engage in it. That is why we teach with literature, why we all go through great trouble to put powerful books into the hands of our students. That is why we get in trouble, too. Some adults don't want children to be empowered enough to think, to challenge the status quo. Like Jonas in Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993), when children are exposed to ideas and experiences beyond those controlled by their communities, they become dangerously individual. They presume to think for themselves. (p. 4)

Throughout the research, studies generally refer to a book being challenged rather than censored; however, censorship, the removal and/or the destruction of material that someone objects to, may indeed be the result of a challenge. Those who challenge books see their goal as protecting students from harmful influences. Censors believe that books should be provided for students for educational purposes only, but a classroom collection or a library should include books on a variety of viewpoints rather than to exclude the ones that may be objectionable. People for the American Way reports that most objections to materials are based on sexual content, objectionable language, religion,

violence, defiance of authority, or certain portrayals of groups or individuals (Karolides, 2002; Reid, 1999).

Most teachers believe that multiple points of view enrich the democracy of a classroom, yet most fear that they will not be able to facilitate the discussions that arise or that the materials that they choose to encourage a democratic classroom environment will be censored. Reid (1999) explained that those parents who wish to have their children read alternate works have every right to make that request, but should not be allowed to make a decision to keep a work from other students. Presumably, there were sound reasons for the selection of the controversial work and those reasons should not be ignored just because of a complaint. Knowing what to do isn't simple, but trying to avoid controversy is neither effective nor educationally wise. It is better for teachers to be prepared to meet objections with sound reasons and a solid understanding of possible solutions. If teaching were confined to the transmission of facts, skills, and the literal interpretation of texts, as many challengers would like, students would be denied the opportunity to use their critical and creative faculties. Because of this, censorship threatens education and students must be encouraged to explore alternatives and be allowed access to ideas, topics, and viewpoints that reinforce and challenge their own. A democratic society depends on such an education (Carey-Webb, 2001; Galda, 1998; Karolides et al., 2005; Karolides, 2002; Reid, 1999, Sullivan, 2002). Table 1 highlights a variety of professional organizations in the fields of reading and education and their views regarding censorship.

Table 1

ALA's Views Regarding Censorship

Professional Organization	American Library Association (ALA)
Statement Regarding Censorship	-An interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights (ALA's basic policy concerning access to information) states that, "Librarians and governing bodies should maintain that parents—and only parents—have the right and responsibility to restrict the access of their children—and only their children—to library resources." Censorship by librarians of constitutionally protected speech, whether for protection or for any other reason, violates the First Amendment.
Work on Banned or Challenged Books	ALA provides: -Banned Book Week (BBW), an annual event celebrating freedom to read and the importance of the First Amendment. BBW highlights the benefits of free and open access to information while drawing attention to the harms of censorship by spotlighting actual or attempted bannings of books across the United States. -the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom
Suggestions for Teachers	-Become involved in Banned Book Week -Become familiar with First Amendment cases and research on the subject

Table 2

IRA's Views Regarding Censorship

Professional Organization	International Reading Association (IRA)
Statement Regarding Censorship	<p>The IRA commend those state, provincial and local educational agencies which support the professional judgment of reading and language arts teachers when self-appointed censors attempt to restrict the students' freedom to read.</p> <p>-The IRA condemn attempts by those with narrow interests to deprive students of quality reading programs and to disrupt objective discussion of materials and school reading program issues.</p>
Work on Banned or Challenged Books	<p>-The IRA widely publishes and disseminates their resolution on censorship and the 1986 resolution on textbook adoption to legislators, board of educators, professional organizations, chief state and provincial school officers and school administrators.</p>
Suggestions for Teachers	<p>-Become familiar with the research provided by the IRA in relation to censorship and literary freedoms</p>

Table 3

NCTE's Views Regarding Censorship

Professional Organization	National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)
Statement Regarding Censorship	<p>Teachers of English language arts must make daily decisions about materials and methods of instruction, choosing from increasingly broad and varied alternatives in order to serve students who are themselves increasingly diverse, both linguistically and culturally. Guidelines help teachers of English language arts to make those decisions. NCTE advocates and supports guidelines that help teachers avoid censorship. NCTE opposes censorship wherever it appears.</p>
Work on Banned or Challenged Books	<p>NCTE provides information to members and non-members through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -their Anti-Censorship Center that offers advice and helpful documents to teachers facing challenges to literary works, films, and videos. -internet materials relating to Students' Right to Read, Guidelines for Selection of Materials, Rationales for Teaching Challenged Books, Guidelines for Dealing with Censorship of Non-print Materials, and Defining and Defending Instructional Methods.
Suggestions for Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Include specific materials or methods Ex. Include some books with unhappy endings to give a varied view of life as opposed to excluding specific books. -Be essentially affirmative instead of essentially negative Ex. Review classroom library and add books that portray groups in non-stereotypical ways instead of removing books that include stereotypes. -Intend to advise not control Ex. Encourage such non-limiting alternatives for policemen as police officer or law enforcer as opposed to insisting that students write or say non-limiting language. -Seek to educate and to increase access to ideas and information instead of indoctrinating. Ex. Instead of eliminating all books that portray drug abuse, include, at appropriate grade levels, books that will help students understand the personal and social consequences of drug abuse. -Instead of looking at parts of a work in isolation, see the relationship of parts to each other and to the work as a whole. Ex. Determine whether the profanity is integral to the portrayal of character and development of theme in the book instead of removing a book that includes profanity.

Table 4

ASCD's Views Regarding Censorship

Professional Organization	Association for Supervisory of Curriculum Directing (ASCD)
Statement Regarding Censorship	-ASCD has created a position statement indicating the organization's commitment to educating students in a changing world. Censorship of any kind would hinder creativity, innovation, and the creation of interpersonal relationships that value multiple languages, cultures, and all persons.
Work on Banned or Challenged Books	-ASCD provides research and information of the best ways to handle censorship.
Suggestions for Teachers	-Teachers should carefully select books for instruction, evaluating their appropriateness based on the students' age, maturity level, and ability to comprehend and discuss complex issues. If educators shy away from topics that raise conflict or promote intellectual freedom, then students may lose valuable opportunities to develop important critical thinking, analytical, and communication skills that will serve them not only in school, but also throughout their adult lives. -Allow parents to be engaged in the educational process and send them consent letters and information about the First Amendment.

The censorship that teachers fear the most is that which comes from the direct challenges against curricular materials, assigned readings, or library holdings—challenges made by students, parents, administrators, community members, or religious or political groups. Many schools have specific censorship policies and procedures for curricular complaints (Carey-Webb, 2001; Galda, 1998; Karolides et al., 2005; Karolides, 2002; Reid, 1999, Sullivan, 2002). In addition, clear communication reduces the vulnerability of teachers and facilitates more adventurous curricula. Many secondary teachers have defused concerns by writing letters explaining their use of controversial young adult selections, by inviting parents, administrators, and board members to take part in class discussions, and by creating alternative assignments for students whom

parents believe particular reading is not appropriate. These practices can help teachers gain trust and freedom (Carey-Webb, 2001).

On the other hand, other forms of censorship are more subtle. Sometimes schools or departments have particular policies or budget restrictions that limit the selections of books or readings. Carey-Webb (2001) discussed his study that depicts conversations with English teachers who worked in the same high school for many years:

Teacher X told me, ‘Our curriculum in this district is set. We have a list of books and we have to teach every book on the list. Nothing can be added or taken away.’ Teacher Y told me, ‘The district has a long list of approved books and we have a wide variety of choice about what books we choose from the list.’ Teacher Z, working just down the hall, told me, ‘I teach what I want to teach; in this district we have complete freedom.’ I am intrigued by the way that certain teachers seem to find creative ways to interpret policies, obtain materials, and create leeway, while their colleagues in the same institution consider themselves constrained or limited. (pp. 109-110)

Some researchers in the field explain that the most pervasive form of censorship is self-censorship, which takes place when teachers choose to stay away from texts, issues, or discussions that might be best for their students because they fear that materials or ideas might be challenged or disapproved of by someone else (Carey-Webb, 2001; Freedman & Johnson, 2000; Reid, 1999). In the case of self-censorship, teachers “play it safe” rather than engage students in important issues. Ironically, this form of censorship is potentially more damaging to students than open forms of censorship since it

specifically avoids public discussion of the constitutional freedoms on which democracy is based. Carey-Webb (2001) stated, “Fear of risk taking, reluctance to stand up for what one believes in, or even a lack of interest in new and challenging ideas is destructive to the teaching process and to the teacher as person and a professional” (p. 110). When teachers abandon their right and responsibility to select literature, they sacrifice their students to protect themselves. Self-censorship silences both teachers and students. This is particularly problematic at the middle school level as early adolescents expend tremendous energy defining and redefining themselves (Freedman & Johnson, 2001). It is at this time when students find controversial issues immediately compelling and, given the opportunity “think and wonder about ideas and their consequences” willingly and eagerly (Freedman & Johnson, 2001, p. 357).

Studies completed by Freedman and Johnson (2001) showed the need for teachers to acknowledge to themselves the extent of self-censorship in their reviewing and purchasing decisions, and “to become teachers who select literature rather than restrict its use and who sustain their professional right to and responsibility to make decisions as advocates for their students’ freedom to learn” (p. 357). Freedman and Johnson talk to teachers and students about the novel *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This* (Woodson, 1994). This book depicts an unexpected friendship between a popular Black girl, Marie, and a poor white student, Lena, who is new to the school. The girls connect based on the fact that they both recently lost their mothers, however, the relationship is strained when Marie admits that her father is sexually molesting her. Woodson portrays the themes of abandonment, emotional maturation, and friendship across social and economic barriers. In the first study, the researchers discussed the novel with a group of inservice teachers

who reported that they would be willing to use the novel in their classrooms and the selection would be of value for adolescents. In the second study, eleven seventh-and eighth-grade girls read the novel and shared their responses. The results of the two studies showed a paradox concerning self-censorship since the teachers demonstrated a “keen awareness of the pedagogical importance of the power literature has to engage young people in deliberate questioning, genuine dialogue, and critical reflection, yet their feelings of insecurity pressured them into opting for a less provocative piece” (Freedman & Johnson, 2001, p. 358). One teacher explained, “Themes such as families and friendship, prejudice, and the loss of someone can really make the reader stop and evaluate the way things are....but I don’t believe I would use this book because of all the controversy” (Freedman & Johnson, 2001, p. 358). On the other hand, the middle school students interviewed were aware of the controversy, but viewed it as a part of the novel’s significance and strength. The students reported that they could examine their feelings about race, class, and gender relationships that crossed cultural boundaries. Although this novel won a Coretta Scott King Honor, an ALA Best Book for Young Adults, an ALA Notable Book, a Booklist Editor’s Choice, and a Horn Book Fanfare, the teachers questioned believed the controversies around the issues of racism and sexual molestation as necessitating self-censorship (Freedman & Johnson, 2001).

Even if there are teachers who feel that controversial young adult literature is beneficial for their adolescent students to read, parents, board members, community members, or administrators may object to teachers implementing these selections in the classroom. For example, Rose (1998) reported that a teacher was teaching

Flowers for Algernon (Keyes, 1966) for years before a parent complained about the inclusion of the novel in the curriculum. The teacher reported that the students discussed issues such as, “child abuse, the ethical use of science, the difference between emotional and intellectual maturity, and the plight of the mentally challenged” (Rose, 1998, p. 84). Although the students were having thought-provoking discussions, one parent complained that a section of the book is sexually explicit and as a result, the principal, the superintendent, and a board member advised the instructor to not teach the book the following year. The teacher interviewed expressed regret for being cowardly and not addressing the concerns, not exercising his professional judgment, and not defending his curricular choice by letting the public know that the book is valuable one that “could touch students’ hearts and minds” (Rose, 1998, p. 84). In addition to this study, Enriquez (2006) conducted a study with students who were actively reading controversial young adult literature in their middle school English class. After gathering data from four classes, the researcher concluded that although teachers usually choose not to use certain books for fear that these texts will create controversies leading to confrontations with parents, the members of the wider community, or school administration, the students actually benefitted from analyzing and discussing these complex plots and themes. The study indicated that since adolescence is inherently a time for testing limits and developing individual identity, including student voices when evaluating controversial young adult novels promotes the critical thinking skills necessary to facilitate students’ transition to adulthood.

Beers (2000) interviewed students and teachers about classroom discourse relating to controversial young adult literature and concluded that middle school students

need to be provided with high-interest literature selections based on their reading ability. After teachers grouped books thematically and proposed thought provoking questions, students began talking passionately about themes relating to courage and honesty. Not only did struggling readers adopt reading tools and become more fluent, but they also became part of a learning community that didn't only connect them with literacy, but also connected them with each other.

Wilhelm (2000) also interviewed middle school students about their interest in reading. These young readers just didn't understand how reading is relevant to their lives, how it speaks to their concerns, or how it might be useful to them, personally, as they make their way in the world. The researcher, Wilhelm (2000), concluded that based on his study, students should still be encouraged to read; however, they should be taught to read in much more purposeful ways, in ways that will help them "forge connections to others and to higher human purposes." (p. 4). Similarly, in a study conducted by Hart (2004), she concluded that teens today have "no tolerance for writing that patronizes or preaches. They crave stories with no holds barred and characters who are real, inspiring, and flawed" (p. 39). Students interviewed in Hart's (2004) study explained:

I think a lot of adults forget that though we are younger, it doesn't mean we aren't exposed to the same things an adult is. I know...people who have been raped....that are pregnant now, many on drugs, and more who are sexually active. Books for young adults should reflect this...I love the more edgy novels because they aren't afraid to...show you what is really going on and aren't afraid to say that it is a violent, cruel world, not matter how much we try to make it go away. (p. 39)

Bodart (2006) agrees and makes the claim that by the integrating controversial young adult literature in the classroom, adolescents can find out what experiences, good and bad, are waiting for them and for their friends. They want a chance to experience reality vicariously before meeting it head on, and they know the safety of having those experiences through books.

These studies reveal that most students who read controversial young adult literature become more interested in reading, are coming-of-age like the characters in the books, can learn valuable lessons about life, and are more apt to build a positive learning community in their classrooms after discussing the important themes that these books possess. These studies also indicate that teachers need to point out the censors and the self-censors that by implementing these controversial titles into the middle school classroom, lessons are taught and students can grow together. Teens put themselves into these books, gain insight, and understanding of themselves and each other. Because middle school students are journeying through life stages, the types of books that they read as a part of their language arts curriculum can alter their decisions today and shape them into who they may become tomorrow. Although there has been an ample amount of research conducted relating to young adult literature and the ways in which it is a beneficial addition to the language arts curriculum, there is little research exploring middle school teachers' perspectives regarding their decision to incorporate controversial young adult literature into their classrooms, how their decision affects the curriculum, and how this integration may influence or change their classroom culture.

Despite the challenges, when teachers promote controversial literature in their classrooms they allow their students to think critically about the complexities of life and

they can move “forward into new opportunities for dialogue that can dramatically, dynamically, and subtly open vital new educational possibilities for more reflective and just practices of schooling” (Leck, 1999, p. 260). In addition, the implementation of high-quality young adult and controversial young adult literature in the classroom might yield knowledge about one’s self and others, will promote critical discourse in the learning community, and will most importantly, “build a society in the classroom devoted to the making of meaning, the creating of knowledge, and thus might contribute significantly to the improvement of the human condition” (Probst, 1988, p. 28).

CHAPTER III

PROCEDURES

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore practicing middle school teachers' perspectives on their decision to incorporate controversial young adult literature into their classroom, describe how their decision affects the curriculum, and reveal teachers' perceptions concerning the integration of this literature into their middle school classroom as a means to change or influence their classroom culture. The qualitative design for this research study emerged from the questions presented for study.

Qualitative Inquiry

Qualitative research has a long and respected history in the fields of anthropology and sociology, and has more recently gained acceptance in the educational research community. After all, educators are most interested in people and making positive social contacts with them. Qualitative research can be defined in a variety of ways; however, it pertains to "research procedures which produce descriptive data: people's own written or spoken words and observable behavior. It directs itself at settings and the individual within those settings holistically; that is, the subject of the study, be it an organization or an individual, is not reduced to an isolated variable or to a hypothesis, but is viewed instead as a part of a whole" (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975, p. 2). Furthermore, Hatch (2002) explained that qualitative researchers focus on the lived experiences of real people in real settings as the objects of their studies. The intent is to explore human behavior within the contexts of their natural occurrence.

Another aspect of qualitative methods that researchers find important is the use of the researcher as the data-gathering instrument. The principal data for qualitative

researchers are gathered directly by the researchers themselves and usually include field notes from observations, transcriptions from interviews, and artifacts from records related to the social phenomena under investigation. The logic behind the researcher-as-instrument approach is that “the human capacities necessary to participate in social life are the same capacities that enable qualitative researchers to make sense of the actions, intentions, and understandings of those being studied (Hatch, 2002, p. 7).

Qualitative work also starts with the assumption that social settings are unique, dynamic, and complex. These reports are usually intricate, detailed narratives that include the voices of the participants being studied. They build a case for the researcher’s interpretations by including enough detail and actual data to take the reader inside the social situation under examination (Hatch, 2002). In addition, some researchers propose very little, claiming that the design will emerge once they are in the setting, but most would agree that research questions, methods, and other elements of design are altered as studies unfold (Hatch, 2002). Most importantly, these researchers collect as many detailed specifics from the research setting as possible, then set about the process of looking for patterns of relationships among the specifics. In other words, “You are not putting together a puzzle, whose pictures you already know. You are constructing a picture that takes shape as you collect and examine the parts” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 29).

The Interview

One of the main characteristics of qualitative research is its focus on the intensive study of specific instances or cases of a phenomenon. Interviews are used extensively in educational research to collect data relating to specific cases that are not directly

observable: inner experience, opinions, values, or interests (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). In-depth focus group and individual interviews are considered by most experts as a conversation with a purpose, a form of discourse that results in a joint product (Hatch, 2002; Lather, 1992; Mishler, 1986). These special conversations are used by researchers to explore informants' experiences and interpretations (Mishler, 1986). Although an interview may be considered formal, researchers must be open to digressions in order to be flexible and move in the direction that the informant takes it. Chiseri-Strater & Sunstein (1997) explained,

You must be both structured and flexible at the same time. While it's critical to prepare for an interview with a list of planned questions to guide your talk, it is equally important to follow your informant's lead. Sometimes the best interviews come from a comment, a story, an artifact, or a phrase you couldn't have anticipated. The energy that drives a good interview—for both you and your informant—comes from expecting the unexpected. (p. 233)

The Site

A local theater was selected by the researcher as the site for this study for several reasons. Located in a large city, this theatre is a nationally recognized theatre that "brings literature to life." According to their mission, they are committed to creating entertaining, educational, and enriching experiences that bridge the gap between children's theater and adult theater for middle and high school students, their families, and teachers. Most importantly, this playhouse produces, performs, and promotes plays derived from some of the most influential, controversial young adult works. Since

education is a cornerstone of their mission and vision, this organization offers several unique programs for educators that encourage adolescents to attend the theatre, participate in the creative process, read the literature, and relate it to their own lives. This theatre has a commitment to providing educators with professional development workshops that promote integrating young adult literature selections into the classroom that may be considered controversial. Not only does this theatre offer learning for the teacher who wants to promote young adult literature in the classroom, but this organization also encourages teachers to share best practices, lessons, and strategies with other professionals while motivating teachers to be more responsive to students' needs. Presumably, many teachers attending their professional development workshops or belonging to their Adopt-a-School program would agree that the integration of controversial young adult literature into the language arts curriculum is beneficial to the middle school reader.

The theatre's Adopt-a-School Program, as explained on their website and as a part of their mission, is designed to help teachers in underserved districts of the region transform their reluctant and struggling adolescent students into students who can read, are motivated, and find value and enjoyment in a variety of literature. Participants are middle schools from underserved neighborhoods, which have limited resources to provide new books and enriching literacy programs, along with having minimal opportunities to include multiple arts and theatre programs in the curriculum. They must also have Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) Reading scores that need improvement and a stated need to improve their students' reading proficiency levels from the administration. Teachers must also agree to implement the literature, the

interventions, and the field trips as designed by the theatre. Three schools are "adopted" each year for a term of two years. Each workshop at the schools focuses on specific strategies defined by the participating teachers and the theatre's education team. The teachers are observed and supported as they implement the strategies for their students. The students are engaged in outcome activities, which demonstrate their proficiency with the literacy strategies. The teachers who are affiliated with the theatre's programming were asked to be a part of the research study.

The Sample

The in-service teachers selected for this study were middle school teachers of language arts and were located through a theatre's teacher-training program and/or Adopt-a-School program. The director of the theatre allowed the researcher to attend a teacher-training workshop that took place before a "Bringing Literature to Life" performance. The researcher provided the population of middle school teachers her e-mail address and a brief description of the study and asked them to contact her if they identified themselves as teachers who integrate controversial young adult literature into their curricula and want to participate in the study (Appendix D). These teachers had the opportunity to take part in one of the two focus group discussions because they had identified themselves as instructors who teach controversial young adult literature. All of these participants signed informed consent forms (Appendix F) and pseudonyms were assigned. Participants for the individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were volunteers from the focus group portion of the study. Each participant from the focus group interviews had the option to be involved in the individual, in-depth, semi-structured interview after another informed consent form was signed (Appendix H). In

the interest of protecting human subjects, neither the director, the theatre, nor the school district of any participant know who decided to participate in this study.

Since this study included in-service teachers, the ages ranged from approximately 22 years and over. There was no ceiling to the age ranges of participants included in this study. The gender of participants included both male and female practicing teachers. The focus group interviews and the in-depth interviews were open to both male and female participants. The study included focus group and individual interviews. The number for the focus group interviews included eight in-service teachers. The eight teachers were divided into two focus groups of four teachers each. The number for the individual interviews included five in-service teachers. All, but one, of the individual interview participants were a part of a focus group interview. All participants were invited, on a volunteer basis, to take part in the in-depth, semi-structured interview portion of the study which included the teachers' verbal explanation of an artifact that they brought to the interview (Appendix I).

Data Gathering

This study consisted of focus group and individual in-depth, semi-structured interviews that were based on Seidman's interview methods (Seidman, 1998). Both sets of interview questions were provided to participants prior to each interview. The open-ended questions for the focus group interviews were semi-structured and based on the findings from the literature on the topic (Appendix A). The focus group interviews lasted approximately two hours. The questions for the in-depth interview of each participant were based both on the responses from focus group interviews and a review of the literature. Although questions were prepared to guide the in-depth interview, the semi-

structured interview format provided the researcher the opportunity to ask further questions depending on what was said by the interviewee (Appendix B). The interview, semi-structured and audio-taped, was conducted in a way that allowed the participants to describe their experiences in their own, open way. The in-depth interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. A panel of language arts teachers who were not involved in the study, but integrate controversial young adult literature in their classroom, reviewed the interview questions.

As opposed to an explanation, the goal of this study was to explore and describe the teachers' perspectives on controversial young adult literature and its effect on a middle school classroom culture. As a part of the individual interview, participants were asked to bring artifacts that consisted of at least one copy of a sample of student work and a concrete or abstract metaphor or symbol that represents their perspectives on controversial young adult literature and classroom culture. The copies of student work, brought by the teachers, were assignments completed by students as a part of normal classroom procedures and were not be created in relation to the study. In order to protect their anonymity, the names of students were removed from all of the papers.

By the participants bringing an example copy of a student's work, the researcher gained insight into understanding how the integration of controversial young adult literature influences the curriculum and the student's performance completing assignments related to controversial young adult literature. Before the participant brought the student artifact to the individual interview, the participant had to seek consent from the student and their parent by having the student and parent fill out a consent form (Appendix H).

Data Analysis

The transcripts of each interview were the basis for the analysis. Verbal responses from the interviews were coded and the data were categorized to find underlying themes and ideas. The artifacts that the participants submitted, as well as the verbal reflections concerning these artifacts, were analyzed in order to find common themes and ideas that related to the teachers' perceptions concerning classroom culture and controversial young adult literature. Data were analyzed with the five dimensions of critical literacy as a reference point. For example, based on the verbal responses from the participants, their perspectives on critical literacy were explored in relation to their ability to encourage students to (1 use their own cultural resources to understand the relationship between school and society, (2 make connections between personal literacy for one's own entertainment and power code literacy that provides access to the world beyond the personal, (3 actively challenge literature through writing, (4 use literacy in ways that relate to their interests and needs, and (5 express their views and feelings concerning literature in order to create a classroom culture of shared critical literacy (Fehring & Green, 2001). The findings were validated by the themes that emerged across the data in comparison to the five characteristics of critical literacy. Findings were written in the form of cases on each participant's perception of how their classroom culture has been affected by controversial young adult literature.

This research attempted to explore teachers' perceptions concerning their decision to incorporate controversial young adult literature into their classroom, how it affects the curriculum, and how it changes classroom culture. This qualitative dissertation addressed the following questions:

1. How do teachers define classroom culture?
 - a. What metaphors and symbols will they use in these descriptions?
 - b. To what extent do aspects of critical literacy theory emerge from the teachers' perspectives on their classroom culture?
4. To what extent do characteristics of controversial young adult literature selections influence classroom culture and the curriculum?
5. How do teachers describe their classroom culture before and after they integrated controversial young adult literature into their classroom?

These qualitative case studies make use of participants' verbatim language as much as possible to create an authentic portrait of each teacher's perspective.

CHAPTER IV

DATA AND ANALYSIS

This chapter begins with an overview of each of the preceding chapters and includes a description of the problem, the literature review, and the procedures of the study. The rest of the chapter focuses on the data and analysis of the study, organized around the initial research questions.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore practicing middle school teachers' perspectives on their decision to incorporate controversial young adult literature into their classroom, describe how their decision affects the curriculum, and reveal teachers' perceptions concerning the integration of this literature into their middle school classroom as a means to change or influence their classroom culture. The qualitative design for this research study emerged from the questions presented for study.

A review of the related literature was presented in Chapter Two, beginning with an overview of bibliotherapy and how the theory of critical literacy relates to the integration of young adult and controversial young adult literature in the middle school classroom. Next, there is a discussion relating to the effects of critical literacy and how the literature that is implemented in a curriculum can influence the culture of a middle school classroom. Then, there is a description of the characteristics of middle school readers and an examination of the ways the middle school language arts curriculum can be reshaped with literature. The chapter continues with a discussion of research on the teaching of young adult literature and controversial young adult literature and how it affects adolescent readers. Although there have been studies that have examined the

integration of young adult literature into the classroom, there is little evidence of how the teaching of controversial young adult literature affects adolescent readers and how it can influence the culture of their learning environment. Based on past studies, it is evident that there is need for a study that further explores teachers' perspectives on the implementation of controversial young adult literature into the middle school classroom (Alvermann et al., 1999; Bean & Harper, 2006; Bean & Moni, 2003; Behrman, 2006; Kornfeld & Prothro, 2005; Lesley, 1997; Lewis & Fabos, 2000; McGregor, 2000; Morocco & Hindon, 2002; Rogers, 2002; Stevens, 2001; Tobin, 2000; Young, 2001; Wolk, 2009). Furthermore, there is little research that has been conducted relating to the influence of controversial young adult literature on a classroom's culture.

The procedures for the study were discussed in Chapter Three. The in-service teachers selected for this study were middle school teachers of language arts, located through a local theatre's teacher-training program and/or Adopt-a-School program, and identified themselves as teachers who integrate controversial young adult literature into their curricula. This study consisted of two focus group interviews of four teachers each and five individual in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Both sets of interview questions were based on the findings from the literature on the topics and were provided to participants prior to each interview. As opposed to an explanation, the goal of this study is to explore and describe the teachers' perspectives on controversial young adult literature and its effect on a middle school classroom culture. As a part of the individual interview, participants were asked to bring artifacts that consist of a copy of a sample of student work and a concrete or abstract metaphor or symbol that represents their perspectives on controversial young adult literature and classroom culture.

The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Verbal responses from the interviews were coded and the data was categorized to find underlying themes and ideas. The artifacts that the participants submitted, as well as the verbal reflections concerning these artifacts, are analyzed in this chapter in order to find common themes and ideas that related to the teachers' perceptions concerning classroom culture and controversial young adult literature. Data were analyzed with the following dimensions of critical literacy as a reference point. The findings were validated by the themes that emerged across the data in comparison to the information presented in the literature. Findings were written in the form of cases on each participant's perception of how their classroom culture has been affected by controversial young adult literature. Each case study was organized around the key questions posed by the study.

Focus Group and Individual Interviews

Each of the focus group and individual interviews revolved around the central questions of the study:

1. How do teachers define classroom culture?
 - a. What metaphors and symbols will they use in these descriptions?
 - b. To what extent do aspects of critical literacy theory emerge from the teachers' perspectives on their classroom culture?
6. To what extent do characteristics of controversial young adult literature selections influence classroom culture and the curriculum?
 - a. To what extent do teachers include this type of literature?
 - b. What curricular changes are made in order to integrate this type of literature?

7. How do teachers describe their classroom culture before and after they integrated controversial young adult literature into their classroom?

The focus group interviews took place at two casual restaurants in private rooms away from the public and away from the school sites of the participants. Because of the privacy created, the teachers participating seemed to feel freer to express their views concerning the topic. Pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of all of the participants involved. The open-ended questions (Appendix A) for the focus group interviews were semi-structured and based on the findings from the literature on the topic. The focus group interviews lasted approximately two hours and were audio taped. Teachers' perspectives were analyzed based on their views of classroom culture and controversial young adult literature. In addition, an annotated bibliography was compiled of the young adult literature referenced by those included in the focus group interviews (Appendix J). Furthermore, data were analyzed from the perspectives of the elements of critical literacy (McDaniel, 2004; Semali & Pailliotet, 1999; Shannon, 1995; Stevens & Bean, 2007; Wink, 2000) in order to investigate whether theories of critical literacy emerged during the discussion.

After each focus group met, each participant had the opportunity to later take part in the individual interview process. Individual interviews also took place in the private room at a casual restaurant. The questions for the in-depth interview of each participant were based both on the three central questions relating to the study, responses from focus group interviews, and a review of the literature. Individual interview participants also were asked more specific questions relating to the themes of critical literacy theory. For example, based on the verbal responses from the participants, their perspectives on

critical literacy were explored in relation to their ability to encourage students to (1 use their own cultural resources to understand the relationship between school and society, (2 make connections between personal literacy for one's own entertainment and power code literacy that provides access to the world beyond the personal, (3 actively challenge literacy through writing, (4 use literacy in ways that relate to their interests and needs, and (5 express their views and feelings concerning literature in order to create a classroom culture of shared critical literacy (Fehring & Green, 2001). Although questions were prepared to guide the in-depth interview, the semi-structured interview format provided the researcher the opportunity to ask further questions depending on what was said by the interviewee (Appendix B). A panel of language arts teachers who were not involved in the study, but integrate controversial young adult literature in their classroom, reviewed the interview questions. The findings were validated by the themes that emerged across the data in comparison to the information presented in the literature. Findings were written in the form of cases on each participant's perception of how their classroom culture is affected by controversial young adult literature. Furthermore, an annotated bibliography was compiled of the young adult literature referenced by those included in the individual interviews (Appendix M). The interview, semi-structured and audio-taped, was conducted in a way that allowed the participants to describe their experiences in their own, open way. The in-depth interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. As opposed to an explanation, the goal of this study was to explore and describe the teachers' perspectives on controversial young adult literature and its effect on a middle school classroom culture.

As a part of the individual interview, participants were asked to bring artifacts that consisted of a copy of a sample of student work and a concrete or abstract metaphor or symbol that represented their perspectives on controversial young adult literature and classroom culture. The copies of student work brought by the teachers were assignments completed by students as a part of normal classroom procedures and were not created in relation to the study. Since the participants brought at least one example of a student's work, the researcher better understood the teacher's perspective and how the integration of controversial young adult literature influenced the curriculum and the student's performance in relation to controversial young adult literature.

Analysis was conducted through transcriptions made of each interview. Verbal responses from the interviews were coded and the data were be categorized to find underlying themes and ideas. The artifacts that the participants submitted, as well as the verbal reflections concerning these artifacts, were analyzed in order to find common themes and ideas that related to the teachers' perceptions concerning classroom culture and controversial young adult literature. It was hoped that this research would: (1 reveal the extent to which teachers believe that controversial young adult literature affects their classroom culture and (2 encourage more teachers to integrate controversial young adult literature into their middle school language arts curricula.

Focus Group Interviews

Each focus group discussion was made up of four participants. All participants are currently language arts teachers of middle school students who identify themselves as teachers who implement controversial young adult literature into their curriculum. Each group was made up of passionate teachers who are truly dedicated to providing their

students with the highest quality language arts instruction. The tables below indicate the pseudonyms of the participants, their years of experience, the grades and subjects they teach, and the ways they describe the schools in which they teach.

Table 5

Description of Focus Group 1 Participants

Participant	Years of Experience	Grade Level	Description of School
Sara	4	7 th Gr.	Large sized, public, suburban middle school serving an upper middle class population
Jill	2	8 th Gr.	Medium sized, public, suburban middle school serving a middle class population
Kevin	15	7 th Gr.	Medium sized, public, culturally diverse, suburban middle school serving a lower socio-economic status population
Kelly	9	8 th Gr.	Large sized, public, urban-like, struggling middle school serving a lower middle class population

Table 6

Description of Focus Group 2 Participants

Participant	Years of Experience	Grade Level	Description of School
Becky	13	8 th Gr.	Large sized, public, culturally diverse middle school serving a lower middle class population
Tracy	30	7 th Gr.	Small sized, public, culturally diverse middle school serving a middle class population
Sue	6	8 th Gr.	Small sized, public, urban-like middle school serving a middle class population
Melissa	6	6 th -8 th Gr. Special Ed.	Small sized, public, urban-like middle school serving a middle class population

Perspectives on Classroom Culture

When the participants of the first focus group were asked to define classroom culture and later how they characterize their own classroom's culture, they all agreed that when creating a positive culture in a classroom, respect was a goal that both teachers and students needed to possess. Sara explained that the culture of a classroom is created by

the way kids react and interact with one another and that, when a teacher promotes and practices respect, the classroom will be a better place in which to work and learn. Kelly agreed, but further explained that teachers need to respect students by giving them the courtesy and the chance to react appropriately to the teacher and to the other members of the class. Sara stated, “teachers need to practice respect with students because some of these kids don’t know what it looks like. Teachers need to show and promote respect and remind students to practice it.” Jill agreed that respect is key in creating a positive classroom culture and that respect can lead to an understanding that we all have common goals to achieve in order to create a classroom culture that is beneficial to students. Jill explained, “We respect each other for who we are, where we came from, where we are going, for what we have to say—even if we don’t always agree. The learning, the thinking, and the sharing, and the developing of compassion—those are the common goals I try to teach. I think that creates a positive culture in my classroom.”

Multiple participants in focus group one also commented that when trust is shared in a classroom and when students are allowed a voice and have ownership in that classroom, a positive culture can result. Jill claimed that teachers have to get students to the point where there is trust among the students, even if the students are all not the best of friends. She stated, “Students have to trust that what they learn from each other may help problem solve in the future.” Allowing students to have a voice and to create their own opinions contributed to Kelly’s ideas relating to classroom culture. Kelly believes that teachers should attempt to create an atmosphere where students feel comfortable talking and sharing. “If you (teacher) give them (students) a voice,” Kelly explained, “I think that allows them to be more receptive to each other and trust what you are teaching

them.” She explained that the culture in her classroom consists of the students teaching each other and even teaching the teacher. As a result of each student having a voice, they will feel freer to express themselves, and feel as if they have ownership over what is taking place in the classroom. Kevin and Kelly both agreed that their best days of teaching are when they give up control and allow students to “own” the classroom.

Kevin stated:

When they (students) get off on a conversation and they are able to just go around the room and ask questions and react and comment. And the next thing you know you’re looking at the clock and you can’t believe there’s one minute left and we have to hurry up and clean up and they don’t want to leave because the conversation is in maximum speed gear and it sucks that the bell is going to ring....That’s not something that you can manufacture...that comes from putting the time in, trusting the students, and giving them the chance to own the class.

The participants also agreed that a classroom needed to be built on trust and familiarity and have elements of a family or a close-knit community. Kevin explained that a student will rarely bully another student who they know. He continued that a teacher needs to share information about himself or herself to students, show that they are multi-dimensional, have likes and dislikes, and good days and bad days. Kevin also shared,

I try to open up to students so that they know me as a person, as a parent, as a friend....kids know who I am, know what I like, know my kids’

names....If, half-way through the year, a fight would occur, students would think twice about swinging at me because they feel a connection. Sara agreed, but believes that if students can share with other students in that same way, the classroom would be a better place in which to learn. Most importantly, all the participants felt that a positive classroom culture could not be created without respect between the teacher and the students and among the students in that classroom.

The second focus group characterized classroom culture differently from the first group, but did so with equal passion. The participants all agreed that the culture of a classroom can change from year to year, from day to day, or even from class period to class period. They also agreed that classroom culture relates to the classroom's environment; however, they were clear in explaining that classroom culture does not relate to how a classroom looks, but the feelings and expectations that are evoked when entering into that classroom. Becky stated,

Relationships build the culture of my classroom. I want students to feel like they can get to know me and the other members of the class. The relationships between the students and the teacher and among the students themselves and the openness and comfort levels that develop because of those relationships form bonds that extend the classroom walls.

Melissa agreed with Becky and also stated that students have to feel comfortable in a classroom. Furthermore, she added that students need to feel like they have a sense of ownership in the class and feel as if it is "theirs." Tracy believes that the classroom culture can be negatively altered by a single student or by one poor attitude. For this reason, this teacher feels that it is important to have "your finger on the pulse of the class

and truly be the leader who sets the tone and atmosphere of that classroom environment.” Lastly, Sue believes that classroom culture relates to the expectations that the students have regarding that class. She stated, “My culture is one of controlled chaos to be honest with you.” Because of group work, project construction, learning centers, and reading circles, there is a lot of movement around the room and leadership shifts in this teacher’s class. Sue continued and stated, “Unlike Tracy who demands that leadership role as a teacher in their class, I allow students to lead a variety of different activities and projects...It is interesting to see the culture change with a new leader...it can change in a minute.” Although the views on classroom culture varied, each participant in the second focus group agreed with Melissa when it was stated that a positive classroom culture is one that encourages a challenging learning environment.

Metaphors and Symbols Relating to Classroom Culture

In addition to investigating the teachers’ perspectives on their definitions of classroom culture, this study also explored what metaphors or symbols came into their minds when thinking about their own classroom culture. The teachers in the first focus group were excited to share their views and although they admitted that they have never thought of a metaphor or symbol to represent their classroom’s culture, they had no difficulty sharing. Sara compared her classroom to a team and shared that “players on a team have to work together to gain success and have to support one another whether they win or lose.” She explained that just as the coach of a team can’t make the players win, the teacher cannot do anything to make the students want to learn. A teacher can present a good lesson to the students, help with their struggles along the way, and support them in reaching their goals, but cannot “force-feed” them information. Sara stated, “On a soccer

field, once the game starts, the coach is done. There is nothing that the coach can do from the sidelines to get those players to win that game...because the skills and strategies have already been taught. Once those students leave the classroom, you're done and you just have to hope that the lessons, resources, information, and confidence that you helped them to attain will allow them learn, win, and survive the future.”

Jill informed the group that a globe would be a good symbol to best describe her classroom's culture. “A classroom shouldn't be its own individual island...Teachers should be thinking outside of their own classroom walls in order to teach tolerance, respect, and decency and to promote multiculturalism so that students can learn communication, people, and survival skills to prepare them for life in a smaller world.” Kevin had a similar view and explained the importance of teaching decency to students. This teacher chose to compare his classroom to a family since they reported that their “classroom family” is far from perfect, experiences conflicts, but always promotes respect and decency. Kevin explains,

I teach how to be decent by example...our district is tough and our kids come from difficult backgrounds...as our former superintendent explained once, but make no mistake, we (teachers) are the last bastion of civility—we are the last stand between society and anarchy. And I don't think that's an exaggeration. Some of these kids—the little glimpse I have of their home life—it's chaos. And I wouldn't last 10 whole minutes in their life—in their house—in their family. They need to see adults who can disagree with one another without pulling out a gun and killing a person. The need to see adults who can maintain composure when being treated

with disrespect and people who can show respect even when they're not getting respect.

Kelly supported the opinions of Kevin since this teacher believes that the family structure has been lost and that schools have to create a family structure in the school community. Although this teacher believes that a familial environment has been established in their classroom, Kelly compares her classroom's culture to an alternate world. "This alternate world is one where time stands still, where the teacher has created an environment where the students are encouraged to share, analyze, and grow." She continues by explaining that this "alternative world" isn't one that schools are promoting right now, but should adopt as a way to create a more positive classroom and school culture.

The second focus group shared a variety of metaphors and symbols that represent the culture in their classrooms. Sue explained that a tree is a good symbolic representation of her classroom culture and stated, "I think that throughout the whole year the students are kind of branching out and growing in different directions through learning and creating in their own individual ways, but the trunk is the foundation of the common traits that we all share and the common goals that we are trying to achieve as a community of learners. Hopefully, the flowers will bloom once the students make connections or evolve into better people because of what we are all experiencing." Becky discussed how her classroom culture can be compared to a bird and explained, "I let the students do a lot of work themselves. I don't do a lot of direct teaching. I need them to be able to do it for themselves. They (the students) are the birds and I'm the nest

that holds them for now. And eventually they're going to get pushed out and will have to learn to fly on their own."

Although it was hard for Tracy to come up with a symbol or a metaphor, she finally decided on a chameleon since her classroom's culture is always changing to accommodate the changes in the student population or levels of instruction. A northern star is the symbol that Melissa chose to represent the culture in her classroom. She expressed, "I am just guiding them (students) to where they need to go." She claimed that she doesn't like to do anything for her students that they couldn't do for themselves. Melissa continued by stating, "I think that we spoon-feed too much to them and I think that they don't know how to do things on their own that they should—learning support or gifted—so I just try to guide them and send them in the right direction without actually doing too much for them."

Curricular Content and its Influence on Classroom Culture

The investigator was also interested in learning if the curricular content that is chosen for students has any influence on the culture of a classroom. The teachers in each focus group had a variety of perspectives, but they all agreed that if high-interest and high-quality content and reading materials are provided for students, the culture of a classroom will be more positive. The participants in the first focus group suggested that the correctly chosen content can increase discussion, teach group dynamics, teach students lessons that can benefit the class environment, encourage a respect for others, and can even be therapeutic. They agreed that the content alone cannot mend a classroom that is broken or suffering from a lack of student interest, behavior problems, apathy, or disrespect; however, the right piece of literature for that specific student or

group of students can contribute to a more positive learning atmosphere. Jill explained that if the “content can encourage the students to express their thoughts aloud and then generate conversation with each other it has been a successful day.” She also added, “If the students engaged in a positive discussion about the content, they are acting more positively toward each other. There is no time for name-calling, snickering, or disrespect.” Sara agreed and suggested that by collectively reading and discussing a high-quality piece of literature as a class, students learn more about group dynamics. She stated, “They learn to disagree without being disagreeable, they learn to speak when it is their turn, they learn that they have to respect the opinions of others.” Kelly offered the idea that if the piece of literature being studied in class provided a valuable theme or lesson, students may actually learn the plot and change their treatment of the people around them.

Kevin shared that he has chosen literature and relevant content for students that he knew would help them in a difficult situation. He explained, “I want a happy class of kids, but there was dissention among the ranks when I noticed that two friends that I had in the same class were having trouble getting along, I intentionally chose a short story to read and discuss that featured friends in conflict. The girls later told me that that they saw themselves in the story and although they still have issues to work out, the story made them start talking again.” Kevin discussed that because these girls were the leaders of the class, the whole dynamic of the class changed when they were giving each other the silent treatment.

The second focus group expressed that the content and the curriculum should influence the way students feel when they walk into a classroom. Sue stated if students

feel connected to the materials that they are reading in class, they may feel a connection to the class, the teacher, and the other students. She said, “If students like what they are doing in class, they will like the class and contribute to the betterment of that environment.” Tracy agreed and voiced, “When I include interesting literature in the curriculum that relates to students’ lives, I get better participation, better responses and more motivation.” Becky stated:

Obviously, I agree that when I am just doing grammar, they kids aren’t really with me. They are not interacting with me or one another. They’re doing it for the sake of doing it, but they’re not really into it...They are bouncing off the walls and it is hard just to get them to concentrate, but when I have integrated high-interest literature that engages students, they are more motivated. It’s interesting that the content really does have a big effect...It reflects how hard the kids work and how they interact.

Melissa had some reservations and shared that she is disappointed that teachers have gotten to the point where they feel they *have* to highly engage the students and that the students *have* to be able to relate to the materials. She passionately voiced:

I did not relate to *Beowulf* (1815) in the slightest, but my teacher was not concerned with that and I still had to read it, study it, and analyze it. Now we’ve gotten to the point where if we’re almost not entertaining them, they can’t learn. It’s frustrating to me. I don’t think that it’s the right message that we’re sending to them, but what do you do? Do you do a grammar unit because you know that they need it and they have to have it

because they don't write well—but they're not going to be engaged even though you know that's something that they need.

Tracy explained that we have to engage students regardless of what we are teaching and it may be more difficult to make a writing, vocabulary, or grammar lesson entertaining, but teachers need to keep the interest of the student or it will affect the “feeling” that is experienced in that classroom. Tracy does understand Melissa's views; however, and said that because of the PSSA, teachers feel more pressured to incorporate fewer novels, short stories, and poetry in the classroom and have to spend more time practicing for the test through 4Sight, Study Island, and other test prep programs. By the end of this portion of the discussion, the participants all agreed that the content taught can influence the culture of a classroom; however, the teacher, not the material, needs to be the key source that builds and promotes a positive community in a classroom.

Participants' Perspectives on Controversial Young Adult Literature Selections

In addition to asking participants about their perspectives on controversial young adult literature, the researcher was interested in learning about their views on the types of books adolescents should be given the opportunity to read, how they distinguish between young adult and controversial young adult literature, and how they decide if a piece of literature is “high-quality.” After reading over Blasingame's principles (2007), the teachers in the first focus group agreed that students needed to be provided with books that they feel connected to; however, those connections were explained in a variety of ways. For example, Sara explained that students needed to read books that help them better understand their world and human behavior. She stated, “In middle school, they're so confused...going through so many transitions that they don't understand. If you can

find pieces of literature that help them to understand what they're going through, and let them know that they are not alone in this transition, then they can be a little more at ease." Jill believes that books should relate to the diversity of the adolescent's world and expand their view of that world. This teacher explained,

They like to read books from Ellen Hopkins with controversial themes that might not relate to what they are experiencing, but maybe they have been exposed to the topic in some way....These kinds of books about drug use and sexual abuse are giving them knowledge that nobody else is willing to give them and I think that makes them feel empowered a little bit.

Kevin claimed that books for young adults should depict issues that they may be facing. He feels that although it is a teacher's job to find a way to connect the book to the lives of students, novels should be chosen based a theme that a young reader can relate to. Kelly agreed with Kevin and feels that students need to relate to the issues presented in the book, but more importantly, she believes that books for adolescents should be accessible, interesting, well-written and appropriately matched to their level. Sara passionately agreed with her last point and stated, "Middle school readers need to read books that are best for their age group. This becomes an issue for curriculum evaluation and revision....The high school teachers have fought to keep *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1963) and *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993) in their curriculum and this bothers me since these books are ones that are more appropriate for middle school students."

The members of the second focus group agreed with all of Blasingame's principles (2007) relating to the types of books that adolescents should be reading. Sara and Kelly explained that they feel that literature for middle school students needs to be

appropriately matched to their level, but also needs to spark their interests, and relate to their world. Kevin agreed and stated, “At the middle school age, I find it’s all about ‘me,’ so if they don’t relate to the characters, they just give up on page one.” Kelly somewhat disagreed and explained, “A middle school reader shouldn’t only be reading about a teen in turmoil and that literature should be expanding and broadening their view of the world and the diversity that is out there.”

The participants then expressed what they thought are the differences between young adult and controversial young adult literature. The teachers involved in the first focus group all were in agreement that “anything” could be considered controversial depending on the interpretation of the content and the sensitivity of the person judging the text. Kevin expanded on this idea and explained that “controversial” is a relative term and any book that is implemented into a curriculum can be considered controversial against the backdrop of the school district. He added that a controversial book for teens might be “stimulating and titillating—something that grabs their attention and holds onto it.” Sara shared that young adult literature is simply a book that has been written with young adults in mind. The main character is a teenager and is facing the same issues that the teen reader may be facing. She thinks that controversial young adult literature, on the other hand, would most likely include themes relating to rape, child molestation, and alcohol abuse. While Jill explained that drugs and sex first came to her mind when thinking about controversy in young adult literature. Finally, by the end of this portion of the discussion, the members of the first focus group all agreed with Kelly when she explained, “Young adult literature includes books and even poems that teenagers can relate to; however, controversial young adult literature includes content that is ‘adult’ in

many ways...literature that you know you can get a parent phone call about or a selection that the school district feels is inappropriate to teach.”

The second focus group of teachers all feel that the genre of young adult literature is very broad and usually encompasses subject matter that relates to teenagers and their experiences during a specific age; however, Sue explained, “controversial young adult literature focuses on those uncomfortable issues that may come about during that age.” These teachers discussed that topics like rape, sex, and drug abuse are included in controversial young adult books, but these texts include subjects that encourage the students to discuss, debate, argue, but learn from each other’s views. Melissa explained that whether or not a text is controversial is usually not decided by the teacher, but is labeled controversial by the school board, an administrator, staff member or parent. She echoed the questions they may ask, “Should this book be allowed in the school library? Are parents going to be upset about the content? Is this book on a banned book list? What negative behavior will this book encourage the child to take part in?” Melissa then explained that the elementary librarian in her district would not allow the book *The Door in the Wall* by Marguerite De Angeli in her library. Because it featured a main character who lost the use of his legs, she felt that the content was “too racy” for upper elementary children and sent it to Melissa to place in the middle school library. Melissa stated, “Maybe I am more liberal than this librarian, but I wouldn’t think twice about recommending this book for upper elementary students...It wasn’t graphic in any way, but children could learn from the trials and tribulations of this character and learn more about how to overcome their obstacles.” The participants were all in agreement that each teacher is going to have their individual comfort level when integrating specific reading

into their classroom and that controversy in literature can be defined in multiple ways; however, teachers shouldn't "pull away" from controversial topics in books and should be encouraged to implement this literature and "push the limit."

Although all of the participants feel that integrating that controversial young adult literature in their classrooms is important, most shared that the literature that is chosen has to be of high quality and include literary elements like symbolism, foreshadowing, and irony in order to promote rich interpretation of the piece. Furthermore, in the first focus group, Sara believes that a high-quality piece of literature also includes themes that allow students to think, analyze, and make connections while Kelly explained that the piece of literature has to have a main character that is growing, changing, and relatable to the reader. While Sara and Jill were clear that a book should not be chosen for students based on the controversy alone, Kevin and Kelly disagreed and felt that a high-quality piece of literature simply needs to allow students to develop a desire and love of reading. Kevin thinks that the skills needed to properly interpret literature and the ability to have a "good taste" in literature will come to the students in time if they continue reading and that without a selection that will encourage them to read, those skills will not develop. He claimed, "To love what they're reading is the first and most important step."

The members of the second focus group had similar views to those teachers in the first group in relation to their perspectives on high-quality literature; however, they also explained the importance of seeking recommendations from other teachers, reading research and reviews on the text, and the teacher support materials available on the selection. Tracy shared that a high-quality piece of literature has to have interesting and complex protagonists and antagonists, literary elements, and a memorable theme or

message. She stated, “I want them to be able to delve into the ‘meat’ of the piece and get something more from it than just the controversy that it may provide.” Becky thinks that reading reviews from reputable reading organizations, consulting reading research, and trusting recommendations from other teachers helps her decide whether or not a book is considered a high-quality piece of literature. Melissa agreed, but explained that if there are not pre-made teaching resource materials available for the text, she would not consider using it in her class. The text might be considered a high-quality piece in her eyes, but regrettably, she would not integrate it since she does not have the time to create resources that could supplement the book. She admitted that there should be curriculum materials available for high-quality, controversial young adult books so that teachers would be more apt to adopt them into their classrooms.

The Extent that Teachers Include this Type of Literature

The teachers participating were asked to share the types of controversial literature that they include in their classroom, why they choose to include it, and to what extent the literature is used. Based on the responses from the members in each focus group, it is clear that these teachers are dedicated to providing students positive reading experiences during their middle school years. The teachers included in the first focus group shared a variety of titles that they consider to be controversial and why they choose to integrate into their curricula. Kelly explained that she includes *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck, 1938) in her classroom and although it is considered a classic, she feels that portions of it can be somewhat controversial. She shared that the issues relating to mental illness, rape, and revenge can be considered controversial to readers. She stated, “...the theme is what matters most, and that moves me to include a book regardless of it’s controversy....Once

I taught the themes of isolation and loneliness, the students related to the book, empathized with the characters, and were totally and completely immersed in it.” This teacher also explained that if the students learned to empathize with the characters, then they may be influenced to empathize with a classmate or person in society who is different from them.

Jill believes that she integrates controversial literature into her classroom because she realizes it will engage students and that she will be able to use the themes and techniques from those books in order to encourage students to read and analyze other selections, genres, and types of print and non-print media. This participant required students to read *The Cay* (1969) by Theodore Taylor in order to teach students to be more understanding of those who belong to a different race and to encourage diversity in the classroom. Although she didn’t think that book would be challenged, there were parents of African-American students who thought that the book was inappropriate since they felt that the white character in the novel mistreated the older, African-American character. This teacher decided not to focus on the parents’ controversial interpretation, but instead wanted students to understand the importance of the book’s dedication to Dr. Martin Luther King so that her students’ point of view could be expanded. Jill stated,

I feel that students in my district have a very limited point of view. They lack experience and information, so I feel that they need to get something out of reading about the experiences of other teens, even if those experiences are considered controversial to parents, teachers, or administrators. It lets them grapple with topics that are usually not talked about...I like to hope that reading about these themes will prevent them

from making certain choices because they are seeing how the lives of characters were affected by their life decisions.

Kevin agreed with participant two in that controversial literature engages students. He explained that people are naturally drawn to controversy and interested in how others handle conflicts. Kids, he believes, are the same way and begin to share their thoughts and feelings after reading something that most would consider controversial. Teachers, he thinks, should let students freely express their feelings in reaction to the literature in the form of class discussions. He shared,

These discussions are always mine fields because you're not in control of where the conversation is going, but that is okay...as a responsible teacher you have to address their emotions. Sometimes these conversations take you places you weren't planning on going and I think it is a real test of a teacher to handle it professionally and with respect...You can't be reckless and glib with the subject matter. After that, the teacher can 'get away with' or address the most controversial subjects, because they are handled correctly.

This participant included that class discussion were most vibrant when his students were reading *When a Hero Dies* (1989) by Anne Schraff. Although he didn't think that the book was written well and he thought that his students would like it, they ended up being enthralled by the novel. Kevin exclaimed, "The kids couldn't have liked it more! They devoured it! Loved it!" He added that because the students related to some of the characters and the realistic plot events, they were highly engaged. He explained, "Although there are controversial themes, an attempted rape, murder, and drug use, the

characters are relatable to my students. Sad to say, these are facts of life in the world of my students.” Kevin also mentioned that because they were interested in the subject matter, students were asking thought-provoking questioning during the class discussions that allowed them to use higher-level thinking and analytical skills. This teacher noted that this controversial title did not only foster engaging classroom discussion, but also motivated students to further their reading. He reiterated students’ questions and said, “Are we going to read more books like this one? Where can I find more like this? Do we have books like this in the library? So, mission accomplished in grabbing their interest and having kids enthusiastic about a book!”

Sara agreed with Kevin’s comments and explained that she implements controversial literature in order to engage students also. Although unconventional, this teacher exposes students to the poetry of Tupac Shakur along with the poetry of Langston Hughes and Robert Frost. She explained, “Tupac’s rap lyrics are considered a good example of free verse poetry, but it can be considered controversial because of his reputation, his violent death, and the fact that some parents objected to my integration of his lyrics during my poetry unit.” Although Sara has been challenged by parents, she feels that by integrating this controversial figure in her curriculum, she has sparked her students’ interest in poetry and found a creative way to teach and compare and contrast modern poetry with the classics. Kelly also shared that she fears being challenged by parents for the controversial material that she implements in her class. This participant teaches *Monster* (1999) by Walter Dean Myers and although she admitted that there are controversial themes included throughout the plot related to the murder that is committed, she feels that the Holocaust unit that she teaches is much more controversial. She

explained, “I never thought that during my career I would be teaching about the atrocities of the Holocaust, showing photos of the ovens, reading about the experiments committed by Dr. Mengele, and reviewing facts of the forced labor and systematic murders that took place in the camps like Auschwitz.” Although she believes like this material is crucial for students to learn and that she is finally teaching the way she wants to teach, she said that she still asks herself, “Is this okay? Would a parent approve? Is this age appropriate?” This educator shared that she is apprehensive when the students begin their research projects on the topic and come across photos in their research that show the realistic horrors of the time period. Kevin asked Kelly if she shows photos of the mass graves and she responded, “I do. I feel that they need to see the truth and reality of the time period in order to understand how something like this could have happen and to hopefully ensure that it doesn’t happen again.” Kevin added, “They need to know that this was reality—not a science-fiction movie, book, or video game.” Sara chimed in and said,

The historical background that we may have to teach before introducing a novel can be controversial. Those facts can make our parents feel uncomfortable depending upon their religious backgrounds or ethical beliefs. Parents may not want to share these facts and realities with their own kids and here we are teaching the material in school. We have to be sensitive to their feelings, but at the same time, have to go ahead and teach the truth so that we send better citizens and human beings out into the world.

Kevin agreed and responded,

When I am embarking on a controversial topic, I have a filter. I ask myself, ‘Would I still be having this conversation with students if there were parents sitting in the back of my room?’ It is usually a reliable guide. We have to be sensitive, honest, truthful, and respectful of the controversial topic and usually that’s enough to keep me from getting the parent phone call or the complaint from the principal.

Participants in the first focus group continued to discuss why they choose to integrate controversial young adult literature into their classrooms. Sara began by stating that even the controversial themes that are found in the literature are issues that kids can face every day. She continued, “In order for them to learn about life and make important, informed decisions, these issues have to be talked about. Teachers just can’t brush the issues under the rug.” Jill included, “It’s really about preparing them for what they’re going to face. They might not be getting their questions answered at home and maybe through the literature, they can find their answer or learn a life lesson.” Kelly expressed that she wholeheartedly agreed and added,

Teachers have to be realistic with their students. What is being depicted in some of this controversial literature really happens to them. And you have to understand where they’re coming from because home life is not what it used to be—at least in my district. Their home lives vary from one extreme to the next. You might have a student in that room that’s never going to be exposed to that discussion or that information if it’s not talked about in class. I’m not saying that our job is to be parents to all of our students, but our job is to educate them so they’ll be successful in life and

successful in the decisions that they make, because not all of them are getting that insight at home, unfortunately.

Kevin followed and stated,

I don't see controversial literature as controversial. It's life. This is why I teach...to turn that light on for them (students) and have them think about themselves and the world around them—is there anything more important? Through these characters they can learn how to be better civilized. I remember reading about characters that thought the same way I did and how that helped me as an adolescent when I was going through a tough time.

By the end of this portion of the discussion, participants were very engaged and all agreed that the main reason why they teach controversial young adult literature is so that students are motivated to have lively classroom discussions in order to critically think about their own lives and the lives around them. Most importantly, these teachers felt that students might not be having these discussions at home. Because of this, school and the classroom environment becomes a venue for engaging discussion that allows students to grow and share.

The participants in the second focus group were also asked to share the types of controversial literature that they include in their classroom, why they choose to include it, and to what extent the literature is used. Becky explained that she assigns the novels *Night* (1972) by Elie Wiesel and *Monster* (1999) by Walter Dean Myers and includes these novels because they are high-interest and teach students lessons. She then stated, “I pair these two novels together because they are written from different perspectives,

portray different time periods and themes, and allow students to learn from a variety of themes and world-views.” Tracy, on the other hand, has included *The Outsiders* (1963) by S.E. Hinton, *The Skin I’m In* (1998) by Sharon Flake, *The Chocolate War* (1974) by Robert Cormier, *Space Station Seventh Grade* (1982) by Jerry Spinelli, *The Wave* (1981) by Todd Strasser, and *Tangerine* (1997) by Edward Bloor. Tracy explained that after 31 years of teaching, she gets bored and feels that she needs to “change things up” based on the needs of her students. She added, “I get to know the group of students I have and assign the books that I think they will benefit from or will interest them. *Space Station* isn’t that controversial, but the main character learns to stay true to himself and my middle schoolers need to learn this too.” She then stated, “I want them to connect their lives to the literature and to the characters....*Tangerine* features a protagonist who has a physical disability. Students need to understand what it is like to overcome a situation like this or be empathetic to others who may be different from them.” She explained that other teachers have chosen not to integrate the book in their classes because of the controversial discussions that students can potentially have in class relating to the book’s major theme. Because the character unravels family secrets and resents specific family members, Tracy feels that some teachers do not want students to “open that can of worms” and share their family conflicts. She said that her reason for implementing the book is so that students can realize that people aren’t always who they portray themselves to be.

As the conversation continued, the rest of the participants also agreed with Becky and Tracy when they stated that they want their students to be interested in the literature that they are reading in class. Sue integrates *Speak* (1999) by Laurie Halse Anderson,

selections of literature relating to the Holocaust, and also has students complete an independent study unit on the historical fiction relating to the Civil War. Sue then explained,

I chose these books for my classroom because they facilitate the best discussions....And through these discussions, the students become closer, the classroom becomes a more welcoming environment where we can all talk, share, and analyze not only the novel, but our own feelings.

She does share with the group that she is taking her chances with the material, but has never had any parental or administrative complaints. She stated, “The literature brings up issues relating to rape, the ‘n’ word, and the violence of the Holocaust, but these students appreciate the honesty in the way I teach the material.” She shared that because she discusses the issues in an appropriate way, the students face and discuss the controversial issues with maturity and understanding. Tracy said, “I totally agree. I use controversial literature in my classroom because it gets the students discussing, maybe arguing, maybe getting them in an uncomfortable zone. If they’re out of their comfort zone, they’ll begin looking at a different point-of-view. Melissa said that it just so happens that the books that students are interested in happen to have controversial themes. Because she has students who experience some reading challenges, she needs to incorporate books like *Holes* (1998) by Louis Sachar, *The Outsiders* (1963) by S.E. Hinton, and *Monster* (1999) by Walter Dean Myers that will captivate the students. Melissa explained, “I quickly learned that my learning support kids needed to read books that allowed them to identify with the characters...so many kids have said to me, ‘I am just like this character’ or ‘This is the first time I’ve read an entire book.’” Along with the others, this participant

believes that the classroom discussions have become a lot more engaging since she decided to integrate high-interest, young-adult, and often, controversial literature. Overall, it was interesting to hear from participants in both focus groups that the teachers didn't choose controversial books for their shock value, but did so because of the selections high interest and the novels' ability to facilitate engaging discussion in the classroom.

Curricular Changes in Order to Integrate Controversial Young Adult Literature

The researcher was also interested in investigating what the teachers needed to do in order to integrate controversial young adult literature into their classrooms and what parameters these teachers have to select the literature they teach and how much choice they have. The participants in both focus groups explained that they have the freedom to choose the novels that they include in their classrooms as long as there is money available to purchase them. Those involved in the first focus group explained that teachers need to ensure that they include the material or novels included in the curriculum before adding additional books or materials. Sara said,

I think I have a lot of choice. We don't even have to get anything approved. There are certain things that we need to make sure that we teach. The district is pushing for common assessments, common selections of literature, but I can bring in anything that I want, just as long as I have the time to do it and I cover the themes, skills, and content that are set forth in the curriculum.

Jill said that it is a similar situation in her school and that "it depends on the individual teacher and how creative and how willing they are to incorporate what they are *told* to do

and connect it to what they would *like* to do.” She also added, “If you are not asking the district for money to purchase something, then you’re allowed to do it...If you cover what you are told, not asking for extra money, not affecting the people around you, you can do pretty much what you like.” Kevin agreed with what the previous teacher said and explained that she summarized exactly what goes on in his district too. He continued to tell the group that it is all based on economics and if the money was available, the department would be able to purchase more of these high-interest young adult novels. He then shared that all of the money is spent on buying Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) preparatory materials and that his district doesn’t value the idea of purchasing contemporary young adult literature selections. He stated,

Our district is entirely, 100%, driven by PSSA scores. We have all been told that ‘we are not teaching to the test,’ but we are absolutely teaching to the test. Our entire curriculum, that was created from state guidelines, is driven by the PSSA. In other words, we do have freedom to use any materials we like, as long as it doesn’t cost extra money and we are teaching to the state standards and anchors.

Most of the participants shared that they have the autonomy to choose materials as long as it doesn’t cost their districts any money for new books or materials. Kevin explains,

When I was unable to purchase new books because of cost, I bootlegged copies—just busted all kind of copyright laws—just so students had a good book to read. If administrators knew how valuable this kind of

literature can be for students, maybe they would set aside more funding for high-quality, high-interest YA literature.

Kelly also said that there is no money available in her district in order to purchase new books that might be valuable to students; however, ironically, teachers can add to their book list with permission from the department head or choose from the suggested book list approved by the school board. She added that the teachers in her district are not given time to revise the curriculum or to analyze what types of novels might be beneficial for the students to read. She states, “Some teachers are holding onto the classics, but they should be choosing literature that better relates to the lives of the students. Luckily, there are a few teachers who explore and integrate current YA literature without much direction from district leaders.”

Although all of the teachers expressed that they have the freedom to include some controversial young adult literature selections in their curriculum, participant one brought up the point that some teachers in their districts refuse to include these types of books in their classrooms in fear that they will be “called on the carpet” or will get in trouble for taking the chance of integrating a controversial theme or topic into a class discussion. Sara explained,

Ironically, the parents and the administrators don’t seem to care or they just really trust me....I like to think they have respect for me as a professional, but maybe they just don’t want to be bothered....As long as what you are doing in class is not a problem for the office. There were a couple of times, when I would go home at the end of the day, and say, ‘boy, that conversation got a little more involved with risqué topics that I

wasn't planning on discussing,' but it's my responsibility to handle these controversial topics with respect, honesty, and openness. If I do that, I can pretty much forge any conversation.

Kelly also vocalized being apprehensive about being "caught" reading something controversial with students and stated, "But oddly enough, my administrators do not care about what we are teaching at all unless they get a phone call from a complaining parent; however, the content and literature that we are choosing is extremely important....If you're trying to get students to succeed, you need to take a good look at what you're teaching." Although Jill agreed, she stated, "Unfortunately, what books we choose to include, is not their (administrators) concern at all, but I do think that most teachers would rather chose a classic because it is safer and they can attempt to avoid any conflicts."

Surprisingly, the teachers in the second focus group had very similar experiences relating to the guidelines and parameters that they need to follow in order to integrate additional literature into their classrooms. Becky, a member of the second focus group, explained to the group that teachers in her district have to choose pieces of literature that are on the required reading list that was approved by the school board, but once they have covered those, they can choose titles from the optional or suggested reading list. She further stated, "I am trying to get more contemporary, young adult books with controversial themes on that reading list....These are the types of books that our students are most interested in reading and they need to be included with the classics on that list." Tracy was almost embarrassed to admit that there are absolutely no parameters set up relating to how literature is chosen in her district. She noted, "There are financial

constraints, but as long as the money is available, I can buy the book. I have never submitted a book to the school board for approval. If I want to incorporate a new book, I just pick it out and turn in the purchase order. It is actually kind of shocking that there are no guidelines.” Sue added that she has also has the freedom to choose anything that she wants her students to read and that she has never been denied the purchase of a book due to its content or controversy. She then shared, “I don’t know, necessarily, if any of the people signing the purchase forms have ever read the books that they are approving.” Melissa responded that the process is similar in her district. She receives a budget each year and she is rarely asked questions about the titles and has never been denied a book that she has wanted to purchase. She feels that this is not a good process since some teachers may not be making good choices. Melissa then explained,

There should be a process, a protocol, or a procedure in order to protect the teacher’s professional decision. In the past, a parent did challenge a book because of a rape that took place in the plot and because there wasn’t a proper protocol, the teacher was alone, without support from the district, attempting to defend her decision to allow her students to read the book. We may think that having this freedom is good, and it might be, but schools need to make a commitment to include this literature in the curriculum and not just ‘sneak it through’ hoping that no one will challenge it.

From the perspectives of these participants it is clear that they have the ability to choose the literature selections that they feel will benefit students and further encourage them to read; however, they described teachers who would rather choose a “safe” title

rather than take a chance and include a piece of literature that may be engaging, but somewhat controversial. Most importantly, they concluded that districts need to alter their curricula so that controversial, yet high-quality YA material is legitimately included on reading lists proving that schools are dedicated to providing students with reading materials that they can learn from and that can relate to their lives.

Descriptions of Classroom Culture Before and After an Integration of Controversial Young Adult Literature into the Classroom

The focus group participants were asked to describe their classroom's culture before and after they had integrated controversial young adult literature into the classroom. The teachers included were very eager to share their experiences and how their classroom's changed over time after including this literature. Teachers in the first focus group were excited about answering this question because they all explained that a change occurred in them and in their students after they integrated this type of literature. Jill expressed, "Before I allowed the students to read the Ellen Hopkins novel, I felt like I wasn't reaching them. It was difficult to get them to read, to connect with them, and get them to open up." Although apprehensive about adding a new novel, she felt that while the students were reading the novel, new relationships formed because of the class discussions that were inspired from the topics included in the book. She explained, "They began to talk to me and to each other. They got to know each other on a different level while connecting to and analyzing the novel." This participant also added that her classroom culture changed after providing the students with choice. Once she knew that the students were not interested in the required reading selections that the school

approved, she allowed them to choose from selected titles before integrating the required title. Jill added,

Giving students the choice really worked....I asked them to meet me in the middle and read a book that is in the curriculum after they chose a Hopkins book to read. This allowed the whole atmosphere of my class to flow better. By respecting them enough to give them some control and power, they did what I asked of them when it was my turn....They just want to make a choice and feel empowered.

The Kevin agreed and stated,

After I included *When a Hero Dies* (Schraff, 1989), I saw the change in the kids. Their reaction was so positive....It got to the point where I was forcefully taking books out of kids' hands and telling them to go to their next class. They were sitting there reading ahead wanting to know what happened so that could talk about it with their friends....They were spoiling the plot, but they couldn't help themselves because they were so excited. There was a new community being built...a common thread.

After reading and discussing specific YA novels, some of these teachers noticed that some of their students learned to be more tolerant and accepting. Jill purposely included *The Cay* (Taylor, 1969) and other selections after she noticed that some students had narrow-minded attitudes. She said, "By including this book, I didn't only want to promote race relations, I wanted students to see things from someone else's perspective." She also included,

I wanted to students to discuss stereotypes relating to race, age, and ethnicity. After that first conversation, students learned that we could talk about the complexities of these issues without getting sent to the office for being racist. I learned to handle these topics with honesty, sensitivity, and care and therefore the students did too.

Kevin responded, “If you handle one topic badly, the students will provoke you and each other. If they bring up a topic that is provocative or taboo, and you don’t freak out, the culture becomes one of trust and openness. That groundwork has to be set early on.”

Kelly explained that it is the content as well as her teaching strategies that altered her classroom’s culture. This teacher shared that she noticed that some of her students were making prejudicial statements in class and she felt that some students were alienating others based on their ethnic or racial backgrounds. She stated, “The Asian kids were ignored by the Black kids. The white kids didn’t talk to the Black kids. Everyone seemed so divided.” To try to combat this issue, not only did she integrate reading materials relating to the Holocaust, but she also incorporated more discussions, reflective writing assignments, and group projects that allowed students to share information about their own lives. She said, “If a teacher wants to try to encourage a student to be more tolerant or empathetic, they simply can’t provide them a book to read. They need to get that student to look into their own soul, to reflect upon their own stereotypes, and to get to know and like themselves before they accept and respect others.” Kelly said that she was most proud of her decision to alter the curriculum when a student approached her at the end of the school year and thanked her for opening his eyes. With tears in her eyes, she shared,

A student came up to me and admitted that he previously hated Jews and Blacks. He wasn't even sure why. He said that it was probably just because his family did and he didn't know any better. He told me that after taking my class and reading the material, he learned more about overcoming his own internal conflicts and about how wrong he was for having these views. He cried to me and told me how he has changed for the better and that he was working on teaching his family some of these lessons. That was my proudest moment.

Sara also thinks that you need to get to the core of who the student is. She explained, "You just don't assign the book, you have to ask students what some teachers might be afraid to ask teenagers: 'Have you ever felt like this character before? Have you ever been as lonely as the character is?' Before you know it, they are building their story along with the character's story." She also added that students begin realizing that they are not alone. Students are not only connecting to the character, but to others in the classroom. She stated, "Students are surprised that there are others in the room who are experiencing similar things and they start thinking beyond 'me and my little world.'" Sara reiterated the previous participant's point and said, "With the reading material as the vehicle, students begin opening up to others in the class. Because of these connections, there tends to be less bullying and more respect." She then stated, "In my class, if the kids truly get to know each other, share a part of themselves, and empathize with each other, they will rarely harass or discriminate against each other."

Although the teachers shared these success stories, some participants did express some challenges. Kelly explained that she has had a few students who were apathetic and

did not seem to care about connecting to the material or to others in the class. She explained, “They’re having their own problems and can’t see past or beyond them. They might say to themselves, ‘I can’t care about this Holocaust because I go home everyday and there is no food, I don’t have a winter coat, I have to take care of my siblings, and I can’t go to bed until after midnight because there is too much noise in the house.’ It is our job to make those students see that they can overcome challenges in the face of all odds.” Sara warned the others that they all may think that they are teaching their students important lessons, but may not realize that conflicts may occur. This participant told the group that a student left her room crying after another student made a pro-war comment. She said,

I didn’t realize until later that this student was offended by the comment because of his religious beliefs as a Jehovah’s Witness. I learned that it is really important to get to know students before allowing them to embark on these types of discussions and when someone gets offended, I have to handle that head on. I told him that the other student wasn’t trying to get him to change his view, but to encourage an understanding of his perspective. I learned that these issues have to be handled with care.

All of the participants agreed that students need to trust their teachers and that decisions relating to what to talk about need to be handled with sensitivity. Sara stated, “The first way to overcome a challenge that may arise is knowing your students and also having a goal in mind for the piece of literature or for the discussion. Students need to be given honest answers to difficult questions and teachers shouldn’t be surprised when the kids

begin to share their soul.” Kevin feels that he was misled while being prepared to be a teacher and explained,

I want a refund because my college did such a poor job preparing me. I realize now that it is 95% psychology and 5% content. I had to learn, on my own, how to bring a kid around and make him see beyond his own little self-encompassing bubble. That’s monumental to get a student to do that. That is the part of teaching that no one tells you about, but ironically, I am still learning how to connect with the students. It is a challenge everyday.

The participants from the second focus group also shared the changes in their classroom culture after the implementation of controversial YA literature. Melissa, a member of the second focus group told a story about a new emotional support student, whom she almost gave up on, that was put in her class from a placement facility. She stated, “Because he was such a behavior problem, the whole class was beginning to get out of control. I felt like I was losing them. During the poetry and nonfiction units, the class became more unruly under the leadership of this disruptive student who didn’t seem interested in any of the material.” This teacher, knowing that she needed to make a curricular change, decided to integrate *Holes* (Sachar, 1998) hoping that her difficult student would respond positively. She continued,

He wouldn’t stop reading and was in love with this book. He was drawing pictures, making predictions, sharing his innermost thoughts with the rest of the class. He completely identified with the themes of delinquency that appear in the novel. I felt that this book saved him and the rest of the

class. He was on the fast track to jail and he actually turned himself around. Because the class was so inspired by the change in this student, they were moved to begin a class community service project that was inspired by the novel. After that experience, I made an effort to always include controversial YA literature in my class.

Becky added that parents and administrators might feel that students may want to emulate the bad decisions that characters make in the controversial literature; however, she feels that the opposite could occur. She explained,

I had a couple of at-risk students in my class that some of the other students felt uncomfortable around. These guys acted really hard and were rough around the edges. There was a huge barrier in the classroom. Everyone felt the tension. It seemed like two different worlds. After I added *Monster* (Myers, 1999), the at-risk students said that they learned from the main character's experiences and they actually softened up. Most importantly, because they were so interested in the book, they became discussion leaders during our questioning seminars and the barriers between the students began breaking down.

Tracy reminded the group that a teacher just can't "give students the 'magic' book and expect it to change the kids' lives, the classroom atmosphere, or unruly student behavior. The teaching strategies, along with a high-interest book, are what will alter a classroom's culture." Sue replied that she totally agreed. "The book alone might not allow the students to internalize or relate to the themes and the book alone might not allow them to connect to others in the class." The students in Sue's class read *Speak*.

She chose to assign this book to a group of students who happened to be very quiet, withdrawn, and reserved. Along with the reading of the novel, she required students to complete an art project. Sue explained,

Like the main character in the book, each student had to create their own tree. This tree told their story and gave them the opportunity to share their pasts, presents, and futures through color, sculpture, or imagination...in a way that is unexplainable. Because some of my students, at the time, like the main character, were apprehensive about speaking out, they were able to share in a different mode and learn about each other's struggles and fears.

Sue continues to have students complete this project and she is always impressed with the community that is built during the unit. She shared, "Students become so much more compassionate toward each other because they do not know of one another's past experiences or struggles before the creation of their trees." Similarly, this teacher assigns a culminating group project after students read Holocaust related literature. She explained, "After students read about the Holocaust, they are moved to action. They want to do something, make a difference, or accomplish an important task." Students who never met a Jewish person, who are worlds away from the tragedies of World War II, and frankly, don't always see eye to eye, worked together to create a Holocaust Memorial for their community. After one of the group's ideas for a memorial was accepted by the local borough for erection, this teacher knew that her classroom culture definitely changed for the better.

Becky also believes that the teaching of the Holocaust has positively altered her classroom's culture. Before embarking on this unit, some students would make fun of Jews and reinforce stereotypes. She said, "They would tell jokes about the nose or hair of a Jewish person. There were times I would try to talk to them in private about their stereotypes. I even called home and talked to the principal about the jokes and nothing changed." She reported that during and after the unit, students' attitudes really changed. She continued, "I don't think the students were preaching hate through their jokes. They just were being ignorant. They don't know." Melissa chimed in and said, "A simple joke can lead to bullying and then to hate speech. It should be stopped." Becky thought that "getting into their hearts" was the best way to teach them how to empathize and respect others rather than to make fun of them and she reported that the joking seemed to stop. She reported that the students were shocked to see the hate-filled propaganda that the Nazis created to discriminate against the Jews. Becky said, "Students were beginning to make the connection that they were doing this too, just in a different way." She explained, "It was the idea of the kids to create a 'no hate' zone in the room and students even decided to spread the message in the hallways, gym and cafeteria. They are definitely more careful about the language they use." The material also influenced the attitudes of some of the African-American students. Becky stated,

Some of my Black students had the idea that their ancestors suffered the most throughout history and they would vocalize this in class. They were shocked to learn that people with white skin were dehumanized like Blacks were at the time of slavery or segregation. Not only did this really teach them a lesson in history, but it also taught them a lesson in

sensitivity. This really changed their outlook and the atmosphere in the classroom because these particular students often saw themselves as victims. It was a real eye-opening experience for all of us.

Similarly, Sue explained that after her students completed a Holocaust unit, they created a pledge that they won't discriminate against others. She explained, "Some of the students had such a hard time signing it because they were holding grudges from 5th grade, but most of them, through this activity, learned the importance of tolerance and forgiveness."

All of the participants in this focus group agreed the one of the most important changes to their classroom culture after they integrated controversial young adult literature related to the way this genre motivates their students to read. Becky stated, "It makes them excited about reading and that changes the whole dynamic of your classroom. They want to be there—and in an urban school district, you don't see that very often." Melissa then said, "If they want to read, they are more willing to use higher-level reading and thinking strategies." Then, Sue added, "That is the thinking that will not only prepare for the PSSA, but for college." Tracy explained,

I am so tired of having students read sample PSSA passages that will prepare them for the test. They become bored. I see that when I provide them with a controversial or high-interest piece, they become so much more involved, there is more participation, and my classroom becomes a better place. I still review the reading strategies and the students still learn about multiple-meaning words, but students are more interested in the

material and I feel that academic success comes from the passion that grows inside of a student when they read something engaging.

The participants from the second focus group were also asked about their challenges after adding controversial literature in their classrooms. Although they described a lot of successes, these teachers described the struggles that came with taking chances with their curricula. Tracy has faced challenges after integrating *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) by Harper Lee and *The Skin I'm In* (1998) by Sharon Flake. She stated,

Because of the blunt references to race in these books, some students misunderstand the bigger themes. After reading the 'n' word in *Mockingbird* or the references to the 'blackness' of the skin color in *The Skin I'm In*, the students asked, 'Why are we reading a racist book?' It is difficult to explain to the students the importance of the dialects and word choice, but I just have to do it. I would never take the easy way out and ignore their questions or stop teaching the books.

Sue also said that it is important to face the challenges that these books may present. She explained that students were also shocked by the language included in the novel, *Speak* (Anderson, 1999). "I usually read the sections with explicit language and the kids usually giggle because they are a bit embarrassed. I have to face the awkwardness, figure out the best way to present the material, and move on to get to the major theme. As a teacher you have to face the challenge, but not focus on it." Melissa commented that teachers need to expect the unexpected and said, "I met challenges when I expected my students to learn from the book or react to the material in a specific way and they didn't." She continued, "I commend Tracy for differentiating with the literature that she incorporates

and I tried to do this too and a few times it just didn't work out. What you think will work with one group, just might not work with others and sometimes you don't reach them, but you still have to try.”

The teachers of both focus groups shared their successes and challenges after they included controversial young adult literature into their classrooms and it is evident that they feel that the benefits of using this literature outweigh any of the struggles that they may have. At the end of this portion of the conversation, a few of the participants shared that they were excited to know that there are other teachers in the profession who are committed to encouraging their students to read this type of literature as a means of teaching life lessons as well as the reading strategies.

Emerging Themes of Critical Literacy from Teachers' Perspectives

The investigator was also interested in learning, during the focus group discussions, if any themes relating to the theory of critical literacy (McDaniel, 2004; Shannon, 1995; Stevens & Bean, 2007; Wink, 2000) emerged from the teachers' perspectives. First, from some of the teachers' responses, it was reported that students made connections between their lives and the lives of others in class and the lives of the characters. Through these connections, students seemed to learn, grow, and change over time. According to the teachers, the students learned from fictional characters and seemed to integrate the lessons that they learned into the classroom setting. For example, Jill from the first focus group explained that the themes that are included in the novels that she integrates encourage the students to be more empathetic and have the courage to agree to disagree in a respectful way with others in the classroom. She stated, “Students are more sensitive and empathetic after we read specific novels. They feel for the

characters and kids in the class who might be experiencing the same things. It also gives them the courage to disagree with others respectfully...to not just go along with the crowd and to have the courage to express their own opinions.” In addition, Jill explained, “When students read Hinton, they vocalize that they don’t want to end up living a life of tragedy and violence like some of the characters did. They also understand, through the characters, that they need to give people a chance.”

Next, because of the engaging class discussions that these teachers reported having with their students, the students were able to create a democratic environment in their classrooms, adopt a questioning stance, and discuss controversial issues relating to war, race, class, and social justice (McDaniel, 2004; Semali & Pailliotet, 1999; Shannon, 1995; Stevens & Bean, 2007; Wink, 2000). During these discussions, students were able to draw their own conclusions and interpret and analyze ideas on their own. In addition, these teachers practiced critical pedagogy techniques by providing students the opportunity to choose the books that they read and provided them the power to speak and writing in relation to their feelings and reactions. For instance, participants from the second focus group feel that students gain power and control through writing, speaking, and listening. Becky stated, “I plan discussion days and I rarely talk. The students come up with the questions. The discussion topics, inspired by the novels, connect with the writing assignments. They have the opportunity to express their own views and have power and control over the material.” Tracy also added, “I ask them to respond in writing or during a discussion to questions like, ‘What would you do in that situation? Or, have you have heard of someone else being in this situation?’” Sue, on the other hand, provides students the opportunity to choose the novels they will read as a class and

explained, “Students change every year and deserve to read something that relates to them or to what they are experiencing. They appreciate the fact that I give them a choice between a few novels. They have to decide as a group, negotiate, agree. I know they will read it because they have a stake in it.”

In addition, many of these teachers believe that students need to be given the space, power, and control to draw their own conclusions and figure out information for themselves without the teacher providing all of the answers. Sarah from the first focus group shared, “Teachers have to create a climate in their classroom that they are continuing to learn too. They have to give the students the opportunity to come up with the answers. They can’t say, ‘because I said so.’” Kevin responded, “I learned this too. If I’m a good teacher, it is because of the students. During my first year, I said, ‘because I’m the boss, I’m the teacher. Do it this way and I have the answer. And that just doesn’t fly. They need to know that you don’t have all of the answers and their responses can be just as valuable as those of the teachers.” Jill responded, “Giving the students the opportunity to have a voice, gives them power and it will prepare them for the future....You just can’t spit out the information and act like you are the expert and the students are beneath you. You have to meet them where they are. Finally, Kelly added, “A lot of teachers aren’t able to give that control to a middle schooler and it requires a lot of confidence and security. Teachers are pressured to be the expert, but what they really need to do is create an environment that allows students to evolve as independent thinkers and create new meanings from the material being learned.”

Most importantly, it was clear from the participants’ comments that literacy was moved beyond the traditional encoding or decoding of words to the meaning of the text

so that students can better understand themselves and others in society who are different from themselves. Participants also indicated that the themes from the selected novels affected the students' views of history and the climate of the society around them. Becky from the second focus group shared,

After reading about the Holocaust, students finally start to see the importance of studying history and ensuring that injustice doesn't happen again. The irony is that they see that genocide is still going on in other countries and in this country people are still being discriminated against based on their race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. Students then see that these injustices are going on in their own homes, neighborhoods, classrooms, and hallways. After they realize this: they want to make a change.

Sue added, "The kids need to know that the hate that they possess comes from the same place that Hitler's hate came from...that Bin Laden's hate came from. They can't wrap their heads around the Holocaust or 9/11, but kids can hate, bully, harass, and discriminate in the same ways that these terrorists hated."

Furthermore, a few of the students described were not only dedicated to changing their own lives, but were also interested in making a difference in the world around them. These students were empowered, through controversial young adult literature, to not only alter their classroom's culture, but were also inspired to make changes in their schools and communities. A few of the participants in the second focus group explained how their students were inspired, after reading the selected YA literature, to move beyond the text and make changes in their schools and communities that promoted a sense of

citizenship and democracy. In order for students to understand this concept, Melissa from the first focus group was inspired to teach her students a lesson after students in her school placed a “colored only” sign over a water fountain meant for a particular Black student to drink from. Although she assigns reading materials relating to civil rights, she also did an experiment to teach students the dangers of prejudice. She explained, “I separated the kids into two different sections of the classroom based on where they lived in our community. I told the students who lived closest to the school, that they didn’t have to complete the homework and didn’t have to writing their essays. Clearly, it was just a way to teach a lesson....They were outraged and clearly got the point.” Sue shared how she is also dedicated to teach the students about social justice by assigning projects that extend the learning beyond the classroom. She said, “After they created Holocaust memorials for the community and the ‘no hate zone’ in their school, it was clear that they weren’t just reading about how to be good people, they were truly acting like upstanding citizens.”

At the end of each of the focus group discussions, the teachers voiced how valuable it was to have been given the opportunity to share their views concerning the integration of controversial young adult literature into the classroom. A few of the participants even explained that they thought they were the only teachers who were so dedicated to these issues and although they never met the other participants before, they felt a strong sense of community with the others in the group. Kelly said, “These ideas need to be talked about in middle schools everywhere so that students can benefit from the potential lessons that can be learned from controversial young adult literature.”

Individual Interviews

The in-service teachers selected for the individual interview portion of this study were middle school teachers of language arts and were located through a local theatre's teacher-training program and/or Adopt-a-School program. All but one of the participants for the individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were volunteers from the focus group portion of the study. Each participant from the focus group interviews had the option to be involved in the individual, in-depth, semi-structured interview after another informed consent form was signed (Appendix H). Because of her recent pregnancy, Mandy, an individual interview participant, was unable to be a part of the focus group interview process. Since she was still very interested in expressing her perspectives, the researcher asked her some of the questions that were included in the focus group portion of the study (Appendix A) before asking her the individual interview questions (Appendix B).

Participant One: "...there is an art to it." -Mandy

Controversial young adult literature and effect on school community. Mandy was especially interested in being a part of the individual interviews since she was unable to be a part of the focus group discussions. Because she recently had a baby, she still felt that she wanted to share her views on the implementation of controversial literature into the middle school language arts classroom. This participant has been teaching 7th grade language arts for five years in a medium-sized, suburban, but urban-like school and has recently added a few controversial YA titles to her curriculum. She feels that because middle school students are going through so much in their lives, they should understand that there are others who are experiencing the same things. She added, "The characters in

the literature, like my students, have lied, snitched, cheated, told the truth, kept secrets, hurt others, overcame struggles, dealt with death, sexual issues, and drugs.” She further explained that these issues or “hot topics” are not the only characteristics of a high-quality piece of literature for adolescents. Mandy shared, “The book needs to inspire students to write, discuss, analyze, and interpret.” The investigator asked Mandy how she defines a controversial novel. Mandy explained that the novel may include topics that teachers or parents may not want teenagers to know about yet, but these topics are the ones that students are most drawn to. Mandy feels that because of the issues that arise in the novels, better classroom discussions have taken place among her students which results in a better classroom culture. She stated, “These books have allowed me to step away and there is still good conversation going on about the novel....I can be an observer rather than a director....The students figure out the themes and main ideas themselves.”

Mandy was then asked by the investigator what symbol or metaphor best represents her classroom culture. She said that a sun represents the culture that she tries to create in her classroom. Since students in her class are encouraged to share during discussions, she feels that they grow every time they open up during class. She said, “They gain courage, they seem to stand a little taller, and become ‘brighter’ like the sun. The little rays are the ideas radiating from them. I can see them shining more and more every time they take part in a discussion.

The researcher then asked Mandy what books she has most recently included in her curriculum and what she did to go about receiving permission to assign these books for students to read. Students read *The Giver* (1993) by Lois Lowry that has been a part of the school’s language arts curriculum for years before participant three began teaching

and *Silent to the Bone* (2000) by E.L. Konigsburg is a book that was chosen by a teacher who purchased the novel right before retiring. Although this participant is content with the novel selections and thinks that they are beneficial for students to read, she stresses that she had nothing to do with the implementation of these books, but had to face challenges with the second of the two titles. Although Mandy shared her views in a serious and frank manner, it is clear by her responses that she is dedicated to YA literature.

The researcher asked this participant how including controversial young adult literature into her classroom has affected parents, community members, or others members of the school community. She explained that the implementation of this book affected many people in the school community because it was not included into the curriculum properly. She shared, “As a first year teacher, I made the mistake of assuming that the book had been read by students in the past. I was tip-toeing around the controversial issues in the book because I was unsure of how to handle them. I had no confidence and the kids picked up on this.” After going through the situation she admits that she would have handled the integration of the book differently and has been ever since. She explained, “Because the novel was new and not introduced properly, there were a lot of parental complaints. I realize now that I needed to discuss the controversy upfront with students and even alert parents of the possible issues, but explain to them the benefits of the text.”

Mandy believes that the parents who complained about their children reading *Silent to the Bone* (Konigsburg, 2000) were concerned only with one sexual scene that takes place in the book. At one point in the book, the female character manipulates a

young boy, the narrator, into keeping the secret that she harmed a child earlier in the plot. In one section of the book, she manipulates the boy to stay silent by rubbing her breasts against his back as she is getting out the shower. Although the narrator doesn't see her naked, he describes the scene that is going on his head. This teacher claimed, "This is an integral part of the plot because it shows the power and control that an abuser can have over a victim; however, the parents didn't see it this way." After one student showed their parent this section of the book, news spread and a handful of parents wrote letters and conducted meetings with the principal, department head, and literacy coach. Mandy explained,

The letter explained that the parent disagreed with the teaching of the book because of its inappropriate nature and that parents should have more of an input relating to what students read so that the school doesn't infringe upon parents' personal beliefs....All of the parents who complained admitted that they didn't read the whole book, but just read the 'inappropriate' part....It seemed to me that the parents just wanted to be heard and luckily, the principal was very supportive and handled the situation well enough because these parents never complained to the local newspapers, school board, or Superintendent....I am just glad that we are able to still read the book in class and there hasn't been issues since.

Since the complaints, this participant voiced the fact that she, along with the principal and department head, are very proactive and do a better job preparing the students and parents for the controversy that is included in the book. She further added,

We've created a letter that goes home to parents listing the books we read throughout the year and the controversial issues, like sexual harassment, broken families, and religion, that we will be discussing in relation to the books. In the letter, we also encourage parents to observe class discussions, request copies of the books for them to read, and meet with teachers to discuss any concerns that have about the content....Over the past couple years, since the letter has gone home, we haven't had one issue...maybe parents just want feel that they are part of the process and they are not being ignored.

Mandy admitted that she is actually glad that she was met with this challenge because it allowed her, along with her district leaders, to create a plan for handling parents who are challenging controversial YA books. She realizes that some teachers, who may have experienced a similar situation, may not have had the support from the department head or principal.

Changes in classroom culture after integration of literature. Mandy definitely feels that the content that is taught in a middle school language arts classroom can greatly affect the culture of that classroom. She discussed,

Prior to teaching language arts at my current school, I taught special ed. at the 3rd grade level so I didn't assign novels. When I first started teaching middle school language arts, my mentor teacher was hands-off, so I had no experience teaching novels and I had to figure it out on my own and make mistakes along the way. Had I known back then what I know now, it definitely would have helped me be a more successful new teacher. Once

I properly implemented novel units in my class, students were so much more interested.

This participant also said that students were better behaved when they were reading material that they considered high-interest and the classroom environment also changed for the better. She stated, “When we would read poetry or short stories from the textbook, students would be bored, doing other work, not paying attention, or acting out. I learned quickly that whether I am teaching grammar, writing, or literature, I have to make the material relevant and interesting.” Mandy shared that when she included the novel units, the classroom changed for the better. She said, “Students were dying to get to class to learn what would happen next in the plot. They were enthusiastic and involved in more discussions too.” This participant, like others who were interviewed, explained that the book itself is not going to simply positively alter the atmosphere of a classroom. She continued,

I have been teaching *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993) for years. During my first two of teaching, the kids reacted negatively to the novel. They had no interest and were just going through the motions. After I gained confidence in my teaching strategies, I highlighted (instead of skimming over the controversy) and allowed the students the control and freedom to hold class discussions, the kids now can’t get enough of the book.

She admitted that it was the change in her teaching philosophy, along with the book, that contributed to a better classroom culture.

When the investigator asked Mandy about what artifact she brought to the interviews, she provided the researcher index cards. This teacher has her students fill out

“exit cards” a few times a week after the lesson. She explained, “Students are expected to complete different tasks on the cards. Sometimes they write questions on their index cards that they are afraid to ask in class, they might evaluate the literature, make comparisons, summarize, or simply make comments relating to their thoughts.” Mandy showed the researcher a copy of one particular card that she thought was valuable to share. On the index card, there was a note from the student to Mandy that related to the book *Silent to the Bone* (Konigsburg, 2000). She read,

Thank you for giving us this book to read. I learned a lot about life from this book and it taught me not to be ashamed of who I am or what has happen in my past. My parents always taught me to keep our family issues a secret and not to share our negative qualities with anyone...this can be dangerous. Like in the book, sometimes it isn't good to keep secrets and it led to more trouble....When secrets in the book are kept, the abuse continues. Sometimes talking about it is the only way to make people aware so that maybe it can stop. I am not afraid to tell the truth anymore and it is not ok to keep secrets.

Mandy was very impressed with this student's comments and feels that this was one of the reasons why she wants this book included in her curriculum. She explains that when victims are able to have a voice, power and control are placed back into their hands and “students need to learn that they don't have to feel isolated and keep secrets as if they are ashamed about something that happened to them that was out of their control.” This teacher also added that an adult in their life may tell adolescents this, but when kids “experience it” along with a character in a book, it may be more relevant.

Influence of curricular changes on students. When Mandy began adding controversial young adult literature to her curriculum, she also integrated more classroom or “circle” discussions. She described that when she first started implementing this literature, the discussions did not go as well as she thought they would. She stated, “Students laughed at inappropriate times, shouted over each other, wouldn’t listen to each other, and specific students would monopolize the conversation.” She explained that she needed to make some changes in order to help students become more respectful toward one another and added, “I created rules and guidelines for the discussions and it worked much better, especially this year. They are expected to respect each other, disagree without being disagreeable, and listen and respond with patience and understanding.” Mandy shared that since she created these guidelines, she has noticed a change in her students. She said, “I am not sure if my students are more respectful of each other after school or when they are chatting online, but in class, they are more tolerant during our discussions and seemed to be more understanding of their differentiating opinions.” Although this teacher feels that her students changed as a result of the curricular changes, she claims that the biggest change occurred in her. She stated, “I gave the students more freedom in our class and discovered that it helped them behave and succeed. I was facilitating rather than leading and realized that by giving up control, I, along with the students, gained so much.”

Next, the researcher asked Mandy about the ways in which she thought her students were influenced by the social issues and moral lessons that the novels teach. This teacher first explained that she noticed how comfortable students were opening up

about their own lives in relation to the themes that happen to be included in the novels. She said,

After they are through reading these particular books, students have been entirely too honest with me about their questions regarding religion, sex, drugs, and family problems....A few students shared with me how they are doubtful about their religion, the 'rules' relating to homosexuals, abortion, and birth control. I am very careful to listen to students without stressing my opinions. I am just glad that they are asking questions and thinking about the difficult pressures in our society.

This participant stressed that a few of her students commented that the novels' characters taught them not to judge others and that life isn't always perfect, but that they can always learn from their mistakes. She paraphrased what one student said, "By reading what happens to characters like Jonah, Connor, and Branwell, I can do better based on what they do or don't do." Mandy hopes that the positive lessons learned can influence the future of her students, but truly fears that it might not be enough. She feels that by formulating relationships with students and providing the opportunity for open discussions, adolescents will hopefully grow and learn more about themselves.

Challenges and successes of curricular changes. When the researcher asked about her challenges and successes, Mandy quickly responded that the most difficult challenge was when she experienced the negative backlash from the parents. She explained, "Without that fiasco, I don't think that I would be as good a teacher as I am today, and believe me, I am still learning and evolving. Because I learned so much from that experience, I would say that my challenge turned into a type of success." She added

that when she first decided to add more classroom discussions after integrating more YA literature, there were challenges to overcome. Mandy mentioned,

Since the kids were interested in the book and were captivated by it, I guess I thought that the rich discussions would just follow...I was wrong. I had to do my homework and research ways to have successful class discussions...there is an art to it. Now, I also have to properly prepare students for the subjects they are going to read about and have to get through the uncomfortableness to get to a comfort level that everyone in the class can feel.

Mandy believes that she thought the greatest success after reading the student comments on their “exit cards.” Although she has used these cards as an evaluative or a review tool for grammar, vocabulary, and writing conventions, this teacher really watched students evolve when she gave them the opportunity to comment on the literature. She explained, “In response to the literature, students opened up in ways that I didn’t expect them to...They shared their innermost thoughts, their secrets, and their dreams for the future. I see this as a great success.” Mandy concludes that her main goal is for students to react positively to each other and when that is achieved in a classroom setting, a great amount of learning can occur. She credits controversial young adult literature for opening up a “new world of reading” for her students who now, not only connect with the book, but also connect with others through community-based discussions.

Participant Two: “I couldn’t have wished more thought-provoking responses from students.” -Kevin

Controversial young adult literature and effects on school community. Kevin, the next participant included in the individual interview process, was a part of the first focus group interview. Although he was a beneficial contributor to the focus group discussion, he felt that he had more to share and said that he felt compelled to continue such a valuable conversation concerning literature in the classroom. This teacher has been teaching middle school language arts for fifteen years in what he explains is an urban-like school outside of the city that serves a lower-class population. Because of the area in which he teaches in is struggling economically, he feels that he is always finding ways to reach the at-risk students he has. Kevin didn’t only express the struggles of his district, but he also discussed his two children and how he keeps them in mind when he is teaching. From the responses of this participant, it was clear that he was dedicated to teaching and was honest and willing to share his views and emotions. Because of some of his lengthy, heart-felt responses, the 60-minute interview quickly reached the two-hour mark. One of the most memorable statements from this participant was when he admitted that he has no career aspirations beyond teaching 7th grade because he doesn’t want to go back to school and do extra work. He laughingly admitted that he was “partly” kidding and said that he really doesn’t ever want to leave his 7th grade because he said, “that is where the magic is.”

The researcher began by asking him to expand upon the newest young adult literature selection that he included in his curriculum that he considered controversial and how he went about receiving permission to teach this particular book. He expanded upon

When a Hero Dies (Schraff, 1998), a novel he first discussed during the focus group discussion. Kevin said, “I wanted to try something new and there is always some trepidation in trying something new. I didn’t want to find myself before the school board because I brought a book into the classroom that I shouldn’t have.” He explained that his school’s librarian is good about including titles that students might relate to, so he took her advice and implemented it. Other than talking to the librarian, he didn’t receive any approvals from his department head, curriculum director, or principal. Because the book was purchased a few years prior and was just sitting in a closet, he figured that it would put it to good use and try it out. Kevin said,

I was apprehensive because the themes include homicide, drug use, and an attempted sexual assault. Like most middle school students, my students are immature and may not know how to handle those subjects. They don’t know how to cope and may react with nervous laughter. They are not being disrespectful; they have just never been given the opportunity to face a lot of these complex issues. I had to set the proper tone and prepare them for what they were going to read about before I even handed out the books. I told them that we were going to treat the topics with a certain level of seriousness, maturity, and professionalism and I didn’t have any problems.

He mentioned that in the past he integrated a lot of classics like *Treasure Island* (Stevenson, 1883), *Around the World in Eighty Days* (Verne, 1873) and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (Verne, 1869) and he felt like he needed to assign more

reading materials that the students can relate to. He admitted, “I was nervous about taking the chance, but I am glad that I did.”

The researcher also wanted to know if there was any reaction from the administration, parents, or teachers after the implementation of the book. Kevin explained, “I haven’t received much feedback on the book. My district is fairly apathetic. I think administrators; as long as they don’t get any angry phone calls, are pretty content and let you do what you want. In general, I receive no phone calls from parents—angry or complimentary. They probably don’t know what their kids are reading.” He did explain that the librarian commented that the students were rushing to the library after they were through reading the novel asking her if there were any other books like the one they just read in their language arts class. He reported, “That was one the biggest successes. Not just having them interested in what you’ve assigned, but having them search out titles on their own because you’ve sparked their interest in reading.”

Changes in classroom culture after integration of literature. This participant was asked to respond to the following statement: The content that is taught in a middle school language arts classroom can greatly affect the culture of that learning environment. He quickly responded, “I totally agree...now.” Kevin expanded,

I thought I had it all figured out. I had lessons planned, materials copied, and writing assignments created relating to the books that I have been teaching for 13 years, but I admit...I was struggling. I was losing the kids. I just thought that I was losing my passion or getting old and burning out. I realized that I wasn’t changing with the kids and wasn’t meeting their

needs...That is when I decided to take a chance and add a new book to my curriculum.

He explained that after he made the curricular change, his classroom atmosphere changed too. The students were more involved in class discussion, willing to share opinions, and he noticed that grades increased. In addition, he felt like a new teacher again who “rediscovered contemporary young adult literature.” Since then, he shared that he has made the commitment to take more chances with the literature selections in order to keep the students interested in reading. Kevin said, “The students appreciate that you are trusting them to handle mature content and that alters their behavior. Because they are transitioning to young adulthood, they see that you aren’t treating them like little kids. Many of them will thrive and excel when that tone is set in a classroom.” He continued by explaining that he has not come across one student who has acted inappropriately while or after reading a controversial piece in his class. He said, “If anything, they are better behaved because they are engaged. They aren’t bored while reviewing transitive verbs...they are reading about real life.” Kevin mentions that the class discussions that the book has inspired have been the most valuable and stated, “Kids have teared up while putting themselves in the place of the characters and have really listened to each other’s opinions.” The researcher asked Kevin what other ways the classroom culture has been altered after including a controversial YA book in his classroom. He answered, “Most importantly, the kids have generated interesting and good discussions. They have also commented that they feel willing to share their thoughts without the fear of being laughed at or made fun of. They are more comfortable in class and I think that they want to be there. *I want to be there!*”

In order to better understand this participant's perspective and the ways in which students reacted to the literature being implemented into the classroom, he explained the artifact that he brought to the interview and how it represents his views on YA literature and classroom culture. Kevin brought copies of the journal entries of two students who seemed to be influenced positively by the book. He explained, "I wanted students to respond to the ways in which they related to the main character, Tony." He read what one student wrote,

'There are times I feel lonely like Tony. He is moody and angry and his friends always wonder what's wrong with him, why he's different, and why he is closed off. Tony tries to explain to them that they can't understand what he's going through. Tony can't explain to them the special relationship that he had with Mr. Jefferson. Sometimes I can't explain how I feel and people get angry with me. At the end of the book, maybe people understand him better and hopefully one day people will understand me.' Another wrote, 'Tony Gibbs is a average kid like me. Sometimes his mom, like mine, is too busy working to spend a lot of time with him. Tony's father and my father are both gone. I wish I had a friend like Mr. Jefferson, but it would be hard to lose that friend like Tony did. I am glad that he does the right thing in the book because he really is the hero at the end. I hope that I make good decisions too.'

Kevin feels that these journal responses can get to the core of what the students feel about the book and themselves. He also wants to assign more writing assignments and create more journal questions for students to respond to when he teaches this book again in the

future. He adds, “Some of their responses are so heart-felt and after reading these, it is clear that they made deeper connections with the text.”

Influence of curricular changes on students. Kevin was asked to explain the effect that he thinks this novel has on students and their abilities to make decisions in and out the classroom. The researcher was also interested in how the themes and topics found in the novel can teach students about social and moral issues and how they make connections between their lives and society. He began by explaining that he never would have chosen for his students to read *When A Hero Dies* (Schraff, 1989) if it was up to him, but he admitted that he wasn’t thinking of himself when he chose that book; he was thinking of his students. He said,

I was playing to my audience and I’ll happily admit to that, because I really wanted them to connect to the characters. Like my students, these character are from an urban area and are dealing with some of the same challenges that my students are dealing with....All of the books that I previously taught featured white protagonists and that’s not who I teach. The protagonist in this book is a young African-American male and my kids can relate to that. He comes from a rough neighborhood and my kids can relate to that. He comes from a single parent home and my kids can relate to that too.

Kevin then told the researcher that he really wanted his students to view the main character as a role model. He said, “I couldn’t have wished for more thought-provoking responses from students.” In the novel, a young boy’s mentor is killed by street violence. The main character has to attempt to deal with the grief and tries to avenge his mentor by

attempting to find out who committed the crime and bringing him to justice. The participant excitedly stated, “When the main character confronts the kid who did it, there is a moment where he wants to retaliate and kill him, but he has to make a choice. Does he seek revenge or does he do what his mentor would have wanted him to do and let the authorities handle it?” In the end, Kevin explains, the character makes the right decision, but this teacher is more concerned with the way the students react to the character’s actions during discussions and in their journal entries.

This participant believes that this novel did have a positive influence on students based on their responses during discussions and in their journals. For example, during a class discussion relating to the book, this teacher explained that a student opened up and shared what he would do if he happened to be in, the main character, Tony’s situation. Kevin said, “He told the class that he would have probably killed the person who killed Mr. Jefferson if he was in the situation. He said that it would have just been expected of him. After reading the book and learning what Tony learned, the students said that we would want to do the right thing.” This teacher told the researcher that he saw this student growing and changing right before his eyes. This participant added that he hopes that the message of the book influences the actions of students once they leave school and have to make decisions on their own or on the streets. He stated,

Kids wrote in their journals how they identified with the character...they feel for him. Tony makes the right decision in the end to control his rage and this is something that my students need to deal with on a daily basis....I just keep reaffirming the learned message: ‘think before you act’ and ‘consider the consequences.’ I hope that it does take root for them.

Kevin told the researcher how his school adopted the Olweus Bullying Prevention program around the same time his students began reading the novel. He explained that so many of the themes that the program stresses can be taught alongside *When a Hero Dies* (Schraff, 1989) and many other controversial young adult novels. He further adds,

A lot of the messages in the bully program focus on what it feels like to be the victim. Our main character struggles to make sense of his feelings and many of our students might be feeling the same way and may find solace in the character feeling the same way. Students may not want to talk to their parents or counselors, but as English teachers, we can be privy to the connections that they make to the characters and they may let us in to their world.

Challenges and successes of curricular changes. Kevin expressed that his only challenge is not having access to more controversial young adult novels to include in his reading list. He said, “We only have 25 copies of *When a Hero Dies* (Schraff, 1989) and they are falling apart. Of course, there isn’t any money to purchase replacements or to add additional titles. Every year the budget shrinks and I feel that the kids are suffering because of it.” He added that he considers the fact that he has motivated students to read as his greatest success. This participant also feels that he has experienced some success during the teaching of vocabulary, grammar, and writing. He stated, “While students read the book, I tried to integrate the vocabulary and grammar lessons and make connections. Because students were engaged in the book, it was easier to make connections with grammar and vocabulary. Most of the time, students find that part of the course boring.” Lastly, this teacher explained how students who were apprehensive

about writing, were inspired to write in reaction to this book and he felt that it was because “they wanted to extend their ideas and share their views.” Kevin ended this interview by telling me that he hopes to have more memorable moments with his 7th graders and intends to continue learning along with his students.

Participant Three: “They deserve to be respected.”-Tracy

Controversial young adult literature and effect on school community. Tracy, the next participant who took part in the individual interview process, was also a part of the focus group discussions and was eager to add more to the conversation about the integration of controversial young adult literature into the middle school classroom. This educator has been teaching in, what she describes, a small, urban-like middle school for over thirty years and remains passionate, enthusiastic, and dedicated to implementing the best teaching strategies into her classroom. Some educators may feel that it could be a challenge to encourage seasoned and veteran teachers to try new methods of teaching and to “buy in” to new teaching strategies; however, this participant explained the ways she includes differentiated instruction and reciprocal teaching techniques in her classroom. She explained, “One thing that I learned over the years is that I have to target students’ interests and provide them with the freedom to learn independently....Every year is new, every class is different, every student is unique...that is why I am rarely burned out because I am faced with challenges and success everyday.”

Over the years, Tracy has had the freedom to include a variety of young adult titles in her classroom; however, most recently, she has assigned *The Skin I’m In* (1998) by Sharon Flake, *The Outsiders* (1963) by S.E. Hinton, *Hatchet* (1987) by Gary Paulsen, and *Tangerine* (1997) by Edward Bloor. She explains, “Over the years, I have collected

boxes of class sets of books that I was able to purchase when our district had more money. I choose what books to include based on the students I have.” At the beginning of the year, this teacher provides the students with reading and interest surveys and decides what books will be best suited for her particular students. Although she considers some of the selections controversial, administrators from her districts have never challenged her book choices. Tracy said, “I have never had anyone give or deny me permission to include a book. It states, somewhere in the handbook, that teachers are supposed to get permission or approval, but I never have and I have never been bothered by anyone.” The researcher asked her why she hasn’t received permission and she responded, “I am not trying to hide anything that I am doing. I was just never challenged after not receiving permission the first time, so I never sought it after that. I think that I am trusted and because of that, no one bothers me.” She went on to say that she thinks that there should be consistency in the policies so that younger teachers, without a solid reputation like hers, will be supported. She claimed, “Not having a set policy that is enforced will only hurt the teacher in the long run.”

The researcher went on to ask this participant if her decision to include this specific literature has inspired comments from parents, community members, or others in the school community. She responded, “No, there hasn’t been any comments from parents or anyone in the school community. I don’t know if this is good or bad. Parents, administrators, and community members should know what kids are reading. It seems like most people simply could care less.” This teacher was sure that she would “raise eyebrows” when she decided to include *The Skin I’m In* (Flake, 1998), but received no phone calls, questions, or concerns. Tracy explained,

On the surface, people may view the book as one about race, but it truly is more about being accepted and liking yourself for who you are. I also thought that white parents might not understand the use of the Black dialect and that Black parents might think that the use of the vernacular would be considered demeaning. I was nervous about that because students, at first, thought that the book had racist overtones because of the language used throughout the book.

Tracy was asked if she thought that students were talking about the book at home with their families and she thought that they probably were not. She continued,

I doubt that students are having open discussions about race at home and if they are, they aren't coming back to school to discuss it. The community where our school is located is still self-segregated in some ways and I think there is a lot of segregation at home still....If the kids are learning tolerance in school or from a book, they will probably not share their newly learned views at home because these ideas are usually frowned upon.

Tracy hopes that the open discussions that she encourages her students to have in class will allow her students to be the leaders at home who attempt to teach their parents and siblings about the dangers of discrimination of every level.

Changes in classroom culture after integration of literature. Tracy was also asked to respond to the following statement: The content that is taught in a middle school language arts classroom can greatly affect the culture of that learning environment. She responded,

I do feel that what I teach can affect the environment of my class. If I am teaching something controversial or more cutting-edge, the kids are just more interested. They are more open to talk about the issues that are in the novel, how it relates to their lives, and it usually creates a more open environment in the classroom. If you get them interested in one book, you can get them interested in reading others from that same genre. My goal is to get the non-readers to read, but not just with the use of a book.

Teachers have to be sure to pair the book up with authentic, beneficial group assignments and projects. After that, a classroom can become a better place for teachers and students, because students will be working together to reach a common goal.

Tracy was also asked about the specific ways her classroom culture changed after she included some of these controversial YA novels. She first explained that her students, at the beginning of the year, were making stereotypical comments about ethnic groups and homosexuals. She said,

Students clearly thought that they were just making harmless jokes, but I knew that some of the students felt uncomfortable with the joking and it started to affect the atmosphere of the classroom. Over my thirty years of teaching, I have witnessed teachers correcting students in a variety of ways: they yell, call home, embarrass the student, write them up, or worst of all, they ignore it. I learned that the best way to reach a student is through literature.

After realizing that she needed to “reach” some of the students and that her classroom culture needed to be altered a bit, she assigned *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1963) at the beginning of the school year hoping that it would positively influence the students and also create a better environment in the classroom. This teacher wanted students to see how people could be stereotyped in a variety of ways. She further explained, “Many students have limited views of prejudice and stereotyping and think that it is just based on race. After reading the book, students realized that people could be judged in relation to social class, gender, age, and location.” Tracy felt that the class discussions really allowed her students to open up about their feelings and were honest about their own stereotypes. This open dialogue created a connection among the students and they seemed to be more conscious about the comments that they made throughout the year. After the students were through reading the book she quoted one student who said, “I might not understand what a gay person is thinking or why they are the way they are, but I know now that they deserve to be respected, just like the Greasers and Socs. Both groups were not understood, but they were just plain, ordinary people.” She added, “Here we are months later and the students are still talking about the Greasers and the Socs and the dangers of stereotyping.” Tracy also explained that when giving students an open forum to discuss the issues relating to the book, the teacher has to be prepared to hear shocking or unjust comments that the students hear at home. She said, “I often hear about how their parents hate this group or that group and often at the end of these discussions, kids say that they want to be different. I tell students that it starts with them, in the classroom and in the hallways.”

Tracy shared the artifacts that she brought that represent her perspectives on classroom culture and controversial young adult literature. After reading *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1963) and *The Skin I'm In* (Flake, 1998), participant two asked her students to write a poem that connected them with one of the characters or themes from the novels. She explained, "Students were truly able to see how similar they are to some of the characters and were able to see themselves in the pages of the book." Tracy felt that she learned about her students through the words of their poems. She said, "Some students realized that they were similar to the characters and they wanted to emulate them, while others felt that they were different than the characters and felt that they could learn from their mistakes." After students constructed their poems, they had a mini-poetry reading in class and shared them with the others in class. Tracy added that she saw a "change-of-heart" in some of the students after class members shared their work. She stated, "A lot of these kids have known each other for eight years, but truly didn't understand each other until they were given the opportunity to open up." After they were provided this experience, this teacher feels that students were able to see each other's strengths, weaknesses, and vulnerability. She claimed, "They were able to move past the stereotypes that they created for one another and see the uniqueness of their individuality. I am not saying that we didn't have problems, but after that activity, they were more patient with each other and listened to each other when they spoke." This participant feels that when some of those hurdles are removed, learning can actually be achieved. She read from one of the poems that features the character and the writer who is one of her struggling students,

Handsome, intelligent, brave, and caring; Sibling of Darry and Sodapop;

Who loves sunsets, reading, and the greasers; Who feels unloved by Darry, scared because he is on the run, and worried that he might be separated from his brothers; Needs to be alone at times, to be cared about; Who gives friendship, a place for his friends to sleep, and books; Who fears the Socs, going to jail, and Johnny dying. Scared, shy, misunderstood, and lonely; Daughter of divorced parents; Who used to love holidays, birthdays, and vacations; Who is torn by fighting, money, and time; Needs to hope for a better future, to be deserving of peace and love; Who has to choose one over the other; Who fears not laughing again, being replaced by other kids, and dying inside.

Tracy explains that before this student read this poem, no one in class knew that her parents were going through a divorce. She said, “It put a lot of things in perspective for me. I understood why her grades were falling, why she was so withdrawn, and why she connected with the book. The other kids were so supportive and were really there for her. It was nice to see.”

Influence of curricular changes on students. Based on the poem that the participant read, it was clear that the characters were having an effect on her students, but the investigator also asked her if she thought that the characters in the novels influence the lives of students and their ability to make decisions in and out of the classroom. Tracy responded, “I think so. A few of them told me that because of the characters’ experiences with stereotyping, they are trying not to make generalizations about people in their lives or in society.” She further explained that students have shared their attempt to not stereotype people of Middle Eastern descent. One student commented that they were

afraid to sit next to an “Arab” on a plane because they might be a terrorist. Another student corrected him and said that it is dangerous to assume that just because a person looks a certain way, they are a bad person. He said that is the same stereotyping that occurs in *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1963). She commented, “They will call each out and correct each other, but in respectful ways. They understand the danger of just standing by and being silent.”

This participant also shared that some of the students that she has encountered have made better decisions relating to bullying after reading *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1963). She said, “The main character was bullied to the point where he ends up stabbing the bully. Students have shared that they don’t want a bullying situation in their lives to ever reach that point. They reported that after they read about the consequences of making a rash decision, they will get help before taking the situation into their own hands.” Tracy also stated that she has overheard students say that “they don’t want to end up like Dally.” She explains, “During a class discussion about the book, one of my students said that they don’t ever want to take the cowards way out, like Dally, and not face the challenges in his life. He said he committed suicide by cop.” She reports that although *The Outsiders* was written in the 1960’s, the idea of escaping hardships by intentionally getting shot by the police so that they “don’t get caught” is still a concept the kids on the street know of. She claimed, “Some of my kids know criminals, like Dally, who would rather be shot by the police than be taken to jail or facing the difficulty in their lives....I am glad that most of them reported back to me that they thought this was cowardly.”

The investigator asked Tracy if she thought that the novel *The Skin I'm In* (Flake, 1998) has encouraged students to make better decisions. She responded,

I think this book will help students who have been bullied or have felt victimized. I think that it will provide these students with hope that, one day, they can find their inner beauty and learn to build their self-esteem. On the other hand, if students who tend to bully others read this book, hopefully, they will empathize with others who have felt victimized and that will encourage them to alter their behavior. It is hard to know for sure if it will ever help.”

Although Tracy hopes that the books that she has included will encourage her students to make more positive decisions, she realizes that students have many negative forces that may influence them. She wanted to stress that the YA books are just tools, and that the positive relationships that are formed in school between teachers and students can be just as influential. Tracy further explains, that the novels' themes and main ideas can hopefully allow the students to reflect on their lives and that will inspire a change. Her previous comment led to my next question about the themes and topics that are found in the books and how they can teach students about social issues and making connections between their lives and society. She commented that she specifically chooses novels for her students to read that can teach them not only about the literary elements, but also about life and the social issues that students can face. She states, “Over the years, I have encouraged discussions of divorce while reading *Hatchet* (Paulsen, 1987), homelessness in *Holes* (Sachar, 1998), justice and social class in *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1963), disabilities in *Tangerine* (Bloor, 1997), rape in *Speak* (Anderson, 1999), and human

trafficking in *Sold* (McCormick, 2006).” She continued by explaining that her students cannot be sheltered from these topics and that hopefully “knowledge will be power” and that the “edgier” novel will teach students the lessons will make them well-rounded and better members of society.

Challenges and successes of curricular changes. When asked about the specific challenges and successes of integrating this type of literature, Tracy admitted that it might be easier for her to simply photocopy a grammar sheet or vocabulary activity for her students to complete; however, she has dedicated herself to creating engaging writing assignments and group assignments that promote student thinking. She said, “I want students to delve into these issues and try to think of solutions that can better humanity.” A few years ago, when reading *Hatchet* (Paulsen, 1987) along with her students, there was a deep conversation about suicide that evolved. She explained,

In previous years, I glossed over the attempted suicide that occurs in the plot because I didn’t think my students were ready for it and I was afraid of parent phone calls. I took a chance this one particular year and it turned out to be my greatest success. After discussing issues of depression that affected the character, a student shared that his family member was battling issues of depression and was contemplating suicide. He said that he was inspired by the novel, and the support from me and the class, to seek help for his family member. I never thought that this would occur from a reaction from this book. I will never doubt the power of literature again.

She shared that not all class discussions went as well during a class discussion on *The Giver* (1993) by Lois Lowry. Tracy explained that a student became offended when she presented questions relating to a sexless society, surrogate mothers, and in-vitro fertilization, and test tube babies. She added, “Although I wasn’t giving my opinion and just asking questions, she explained that her religious beliefs prevented her from being a part of the conversation. After class, I explained to her that she was free to explain her thoughts and the views of her religion in order to offer another perspective.” Although she claims it was a difficult discussion to have with her student, this participant realized that her student felt less isolated after she was provided the opportunity to have her own voice.

At the end of this interview, participant two explained the importance of trusting her instincts and providing her students with reading materials that they need. She stated, “Many teachers are afraid to take chances and they think they need to stick to the safety and security of the literature book, but students today need to be exposed to the world around them so that they are prepared for their entrance into an ever-changing society.” This participant believes that controversial, but high-quality young adult literature is an integral tool for teachers to use to facilitate discussions, teach students lessons, and expose them to the realities of our world.

Participant Four: “Students became more vulnerable, trusting, willing to talk, share, and listen to each other.” -Sue

Controversial young adult literature and effect on school community. Sue was extremely passionate while discussing her views relating to this topic and talked with the researcher long after the interviews were over. Based on her thoughtful comments, it

seemed as if this participant was dedicated to the profession of education, wanted to teach the best strategies to her students, and was most interested in continuing her education and advancing professionally. At the time of the individual interviews, this teacher was busy continuing her principal certification program and hosting a student teacher in her classroom. Sue stressed the fact that she was overwhelmed with her role as a cooperating teacher and felt that giving up the control that she has in her classroom for six years is challenging. Although she excitedly claimed that it is important to her to develop professionally and even more important to educate prospective teachers, she was especially excited when talking about the ways she integrates controversial YA literature into her classroom.

Sue told me that she considers *Speak* (1999) by Laurie Halse Anderson, *The Diary of Anne Frank* (Frank, 1947), and other selected Holocaust related literature the controversial titles that she includes in her curriculum. She also feels that *Flowers for Algernon* (1959) by Daniel Keyes and “The Birthmark” (1843) by Nathaniel Hawthorne have controversial topics and themes imbedded in the plots. She also included that there is no formal approval process for the selection of books that are included in curriculum. She explains, “Teachers are on their own and if there is money available to fulfill the purchase order, no one asks any questions and the book is ordered...I send home a syllabus at the beginning of the year so that parents know what we are reading...Parents haven’t challenged any of my book selections yet.” Sue feels that sending the syllabus home early in the year allows her to face any parent problems head-on and in a proactive manner. She added, “Fortunately or unfortunately, parents probably aren’t reading the syllabus, let alone the books selected for our course.”

When the investigator asked Sue about the ways the literature that she has chosen affected community members, parents, other teachers or administrators, she laughed out loud. She said,

No, no one seems to care, but I have had discussions with other colleagues who were shocked that I was bringing a book like this into the class. They were asking me how I was going to get through the ‘uncomfortable’ parts and wanted to know if I was going to directly discuss the controversial issues with the kids or if I was going to tiptoe around the issue or avoid them altogether. They were amazed when I would tell them that I was going to face the issues....After including the book for several years now, it is not that taboo anymore and doesn’t get the same reaction as it did when I first started including it.

Sue added that maybe it wasn’t the teachers who were no longer shocked, but the way in which she teaches the book doesn’t bring on negative attention or elicit a negative reaction. Like other participants have shared, this teacher feels that it is sad that for the most part, the school community seems to be disinterested in what students are reading.

Changes in classroom culture after integration of literature. The researcher asked Sue if she believes that the content that is taught in middle school language arts can affect the culture the classroom and she responded that it “absolutely” can influence a classroom’s culture. She expressed,

I notice a vibe change in my class when we switch gears from nonfiction to fiction, from grammar to vocabulary, from writing to poetry. There is a rhythm and a flow to the class when things are going well...when the

students are responding...and they are enjoying what they are learning. I quickly know when they aren't interested or when it appears when they are just going through the motions. It is very awkward. I used to just move through the muddy waters whether they seemed interested or not, now I make changes on the spot and quickly try to gain their interest before I lose them....I want them to get the most out of my class.

This participant did report that she experienced changes in her classroom's culture after she decided to integrate controversial YA literature into her curriculum. She compared her classroom to a library before making changes. Students were quiet, withdrawn, shy, and even uncomfortable. She said, "They all just did what they were supposed to do...any other teacher would have loved this type of behavior, but just because a classroom is quiet and appears controlled doesn't mean that learning is going on." Sue shared that she wanted students to be excited, active, involved and even loud in class. She explains, "That's why I incorporate a lot of this literature into my room because it opens the class up to talking, opening up, and debating about topics they are interested in and can relate to....After they begin talking, they get to know each other and that makes the classroom a more welcoming and inclusive environment."

After incorporating *Speak* (Anderson, 1999) in her language arts class, she said that she noticed a distinct change in her students and because of that, a change in her classroom's atmosphere. When Sue started teaching, she didn't have a book like *Speak* to teach and without a lot of selections to choose from had to teach a historical novel about John Burgoyne. She exclaimed, "The kids hated it! They absolutely hated it! There was often dead silence in the room, they were bored, and they always looked like

they were in pain. They couldn't connect with the book and there was no rigor or relevance to my class." Sue also added that the students felt a sense of pride that I thought they were mature enough to handle the issues that appeared in the book, therefore, they "acted the part and acted more mature in class than they did prior to the start of the book." She also claimed that the relationships that were formed changed the culture of her classroom. For example, she explained that because of the class discussions that are conducted, she and the students get to know one another on a different level. She said, "Because of the issues that we are discussing, the students become more vulnerable, trusting, willing to talk, share, and listen to each other....I get to know them, they get to know me, and they get to know each other....We could not have these discussions with some of the novels that we were reading in years past."

The artifact that Sue brought represents her views on controversial YA literature, classroom culture, and the relationships that have been formed after reading the selected novel. Sue brought copies of the art projects of a few students that they created during their reading of *Speak* (Anderson, 1999). While the main character, Melinda, is creating a tree for a project in art class, students in participant four's class also have to create a tree. Similar to the character, these trees end up representing the student in some way and become amazing symbols of a student's identity and journey through life. This teacher explained, "From this one assignment, I learn their whole story and so much about the strengths and challenges of each of them...they also learn a lot about each other." She explained the project (Appendix J) of one particular student,

She drew a palm tree and as you can see, it has three coconuts on the tree and the other two look like they have fallen and are separated from the

others. We learned, through her reflection share-out, that her mom and sister live in Florida and that she, her father, and brother live here. The tree representing her family is also on a stranded island. She told her partner that she feels isolated, along with her immediate family, because she has no extended family, hardly any friends, and feels very lonely. She also added that the sun in the drawing represents her hope for the future that life will get better one day. I also found out that the assigned partner that she shared with was now sitting with her at lunch...I was glad that a friendship was beginning because of the tree project.

Sue goes on to explain that, like the character, she wants students to find or create their voice through the art piece.

Sue showed me and then explained another drawing of a tree and its surroundings being destroyed in a landslide (Appendix K). She said that this student shared that he felt like there were times when he felt like aspects of life were quickly knocking him down, crushing him, or rushing by him. Sue claimed, "I would bet that this student would have never had this conversation with his assignment partner if it wasn't for the book or the project....It was really eye opening." In the third piece that was shown to me, the student artist depicted a tree isolated from others in the forest (Appendix L). The teacher shared that the artist is a student who is often bullied and is considered a loner. She said that he told the class that he drew a hole in the tree because he often felt empty and that there is a hole in him. She added that he said that the animals in the forest are his only friends. Sue hoped that through this project, students would learn to be more empathetic towards those who are treated as outcasts. She also added that without using the novel as a

vehicle, students would not have shared or connected with others in the class. She thinks that when students share their projects, relationships are built and students learn more about their classmates, which leads to more of an understanding and tolerance among the kids in the classroom. After the trees are completed, students trade them with a partner and reflect upon, interpret, and analyze what is represented in the piece. Sue reports,

I am amazed by the conversations that I overhear when they are sharing and I know that barriers are being broken down. For example, this year these two students were asking each other questions like, ‘Why is this part so dark? Why do you have three coconuts on your tree and two on the ground? What is this tree saying about you? The other made comments like, ‘I never knew that about you.’, ‘You are so strong to have overcome that.’, and ‘I feel the same way.’ Students may not be able to explain their feelings vocally, but they can express themselves through art....The two students begin to see each other in a different way...This person is someone that they wouldn’t have talked with before and now they are more understanding of a student who is not like them.

Influence of curricular changes on students. The researcher went on to ask Sue if she thought that the characters have any influence on her students and their decision making ability in or out of the classroom. She replied, “I definitely think that students put themselves in the character’s shoes and think about what they would do in specific situations. It helps because the kids are the same age as most of the characters that we read about. I have heard students say, ‘Well, Melinda did that.’ Or, ‘If I was Anne, I would have done it a different way.’ I hope that when and if students are in similar

situations, they can think back to what the characters did and hopefully learn from their experiences.” This teacher reported that during the Holocaust literature unit, when having class discussions, there were more than a few students who talked about the ways they were going to treat their family members better. She explained, “most students were really affected by the literature and some of them said that reading about the Holocaust made them want to be better people....They realized that these stories and characters weren’t just ideas created by a fiction writer, but were unfortunately true.”

The researcher then asked Sue about whether or not she thought that the themes and topics in the controversial YA literature teach students about social issues, moral lessons, or how to be better people in society. She thinks that students, while reading the literature, learn more about dealing with prejudice, hate, bullying, social anxiety disorder, the effects of rape, the results of war, and how to deal with issues relating to friends and family. She stated,

Through the actions of the characters, hopefully they can learn to be better problem solvers and be more respectful to others. Students will make comments that hate and prejudice occur today in the world, but it takes a strong kid to realize that it is happening in the cafeteria and to make a change....One student will connect with a character and say to me, ‘I did the same thing to my friend that Melinda did in the book...I hope I didn’t hurt her feelings.’ Or, they will ask me, ‘Why aren’t there any Black kids sitting with white kids in the cafeteria?’

Sue explained that some students were influenced by the literature and even attempted to have a “Mix It Up” day in the cafeteria. On one particular day, students were encouraged

to sit with people at lunch who they have never sat with before. She added, “It was a success because it was student initiated, but it was only for one day. Hopefully, students will begin doing it on their own.” She explained that teachers try to force anti-bullying activities, character education techniques, and team building exercises on students all of the time; however, these initiatives usually are not very successful because they are additional to the regular curriculum and are usually “one shot deals.” This teacher believes that the characters, lessons, and issues featured in controversial YA literature can have more of an effect on students than most curricular programs.

Challenges and successes of curricular changes. When Sue was asked about the successes and challenges that she experienced when implementing this type of literature, she shared many more successes than challenges. She believes that she is often challenged by time constraints. Because 8th graders take the PSSA in four different areas, there is not a lot of time for her to add another YA title to her curriculum or have more class discussions. This teacher also shared that it has been a challenge for substitute or student teachers to try to build the same culture in her classroom when she isn’t available. She stated, “Teachers aren’t taught in college how to create a good culture in their classroom. It is something that is learned and honed over time after you get used to the ebb and flow of your classroom and after you get to know your students.”

Sue thinks that she has experienced success because students have admitted to her that they haven’t been interested in the books that they had to read for classes in the past and that they “fake read or cheat” in other language arts classes. She was asked how they would cheat and she told reported that they admitted that they would research plot event summaries on the internet, read Spark or Cliff’s notes, ask older students to write their

essays, or skim the chapters they would have tests on. She said, “Students will say, ‘This is the first book I really read...cover to cover...are there any more like it?’ That is a success go me.” Implementing YA literature has also allowed this teacher to be more successful at teaching writing, grammar, and vocabulary. She explained, “Students are more apt to write and practice grammar if it relates to the literature that they are interested in...I usually try to integrate the reading, writing, grammar, and spelling, so it makes it easier...they actually want to do it because they are usually hooked into the book.” Sue credits most of her success to the fact that she has the autonomy to teach the literature of her choice without any constrictions. She further explains,

The reason why I teach this literature is because I can; however, if I had to fight to keep titles in my curriculum I would. There may be some teachers and administrators who might cross a book off because of the incest, drugs, sex, or violence that might be included, but they need to realize that the book might actually teach a student an important lesson...Times have changed and English teachers just can’t teach the classics anymore.”

Towards the end of the interview, Sue expressed her concern for the future of education. She feels that with data driven instruction, state tests, and lowering graduation rates, teachers are under a lot of pressure to perform to the standards and administrators may not find the benefit of purchasing new, contemporary literature, let alone young adult, controversial literature. She added that hopefully other teachers will discover this literature so that they can experience a change in themselves as well as in their students.

Participant Five: “I saw students change before my eyes.” -Kelly

Controversial young adult literature and effect on school community. Kelly, who was a part of the first focus group discussion, was the most interested in being a part of the individual interview portion of the study. Surprisingly, she seemed to be the busiest of the group. She was going through some upheaval in her personal life and although it was difficult for us to meet to do the interview, this participant wouldn't give up and was willing to sacrifice her time as a single, struggling mother to talk about a topic that she felt was very important to discuss. Actually, she was the most affected by the focus group discussion and vocalized that she was influenced to go back to her school and ensure that the changes that she has already made in her curriculum extend to the rest of the English department at her middle and high school. After teaching for nine years in a large, urban-like district, she told me that she thought she had “it all figured out,” but admitted that it is very hard to make changes in education and she realizes now that she has so much more to learn.

Kelly began by talking about the specific selections she has assigned for her students to read over the past few years and how she went about receiving permission to include these books in her curriculum. She explained that she has recently included *Monster* (1999) by Walter Dean Myers, *That Was Then, This is Now* (1971) by S.E. Hinton, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) by Harper Lee, and a variety of short Holocaust related pieces, but she does not really perceive these selections as being controversial. She stated, “I don't think that these books have much of a shock value to them, but there are teachers whose eyes widen when I tell them what books I choose to

teach.” She added that she wants to add more current and even more controversial themed novels to her curriculum, but met some challenges along the way.

This participant, like the others, did not have to seek permission to teach the Myers, Hinton, and Lee novels since they were already purchased, placed on an approved reading list, and they had been taught in years past. At the time, Kelly was new to her district, but had been teaching for 6 years in another district. She said,

Although the books were approved, ordered, and even implemented years ago, they were sitting in boxes unused. I wanted to use them. The department head suggested that I shouldn’t have them read ...*Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) because, in the past, she had a problem with younger students reading a book that was more meant for high school kids. She didn’t think that I should have them read *Monster* (Myers, 1999) because there might be students who look up to the main character who is on trial for a crime. She also thought that the violence and drug use in *That Was Then...*(Hinton, 1971) might not be age appropriate for middle school students. As a newer teacher in the district, she thought that it was best if I stuck to the literature in the textbook.

Kelly reported that she took her advice as first, but after they started curriculum revisions and after that department head retired, she began assigning the books to students and did not feel that she experienced any of the problems that the department head had when she taught the books. She added, “Maybe I had more success with them because I didn’t think they were extremely controversial so I approached them with less anxiety and more confidence. I had a different attitude about teaching the books than she did.”

When the researcher asked Kelly about the ways in which the school community or parents were affected by her decision to implement this literature, she responded that she was surprised that the backlash came from the department head and not from a parent. She added, “I just expected that if someone was going to challenge a book, it was going to be a parent, not a fellow teacher... When I got to know the community that I teach in a little better, I understood why.” This participant shared that most of the parents in the community are not very interested in pursuing information about what their child is learning. She stated, “Parents might have an opinion, be angry, frustrated, or even be excited about the material, but I have never received a call about the content that I was teaching. I find that sad.” She explains that although parents will become involved when their child is failing or misbehaving, they do not seem to take an interest what material they are learning about or why. She said,

My parents just don't have time to read the book along with their kid, study with their kid, or have an analytical discussion with them about the poetry that was written by prisoners at death camps during the Holocaust....Some of them are single parents, working two jobs, and relying on their middle schoolers to watch their younger children. So, the reality is, unless their kid is in a fight or being disrespectful, they don't want to be bothered.

Kelly admits that she often questions herself about the age-appropriateness of a book and handles the presentation of controversial subjects carefully, but as a result of the parents' lack of involvement, she rarely fears that she will be challenged based on the controversy of a book that she chooses to have her students read.

Changes in classroom culture after integration of literature. Kelly agrees with the statement that the content that is taught in middle school classrooms can greatly affect the culture of that learning environment. She believes that middle school students especially are going to respond more positively to learning material that they are interested in. She added, “For example, they are going to respond more positively to the music they like more so than to the music their parents like.” She explains that she can walk by a classroom in her school and can instantly learn about the culture that has been formulated in that class. She asks herself these questions as she observes students in her class or in others,

Are the kids busy or are they just doing busy work? Are they passive or active? Are they happy or do they have blank stares on the faces? Are they engaged or do the kids have their heads down or look bored to death? Are they working in groups with kids other than their friends or are they just working hard at cheating in groups? Is the teacher facilitating or controlling? Is the teacher asking questions or giving answers? Who is working harder: the teacher or the students?....I have a theory, if the students are interested in the material and the way it is being presented, they will like the class, if they like the class they will probably like the teacher and the students in that class and the happier they will be, if they are happy, they are less likely to be a behavior problem, be mean to others, and hinder the learning of themselves and others. That is why the culture of a classroom is so important.

She added that she has experienced teaching in classrooms with both positive and negative atmospheres and feels that the material provided for students truly can influence the climate of that learning environment.

When asked Kelly how her classroom culture has changed after including controversial YA literature, she shared that when she first started teaching at the school where she currently teaches, it was suggested that she choose from the literature selections that are provided in the textbook. She explains, “The books were outdated, in really bad shape, and weren’t aesthetically pleasing. The novel included in the book was abridged, the play was one they read a few years prior [sic], and the short fiction and nonfiction selections were not diverse or multicultural.” This teacher shared that as a new teacher in the school, it was easier for her to work from the textbook and its accompanying resources than to work from a novel with no supplemental materials; however, the classroom atmosphere was one of boredom and negativity. She said, “I tried to make the material as interesting as possible, but the kids weren’t relating to the literature from the Revolutionary War and there weren’t interesting topics to discuss or write about....They behaved because I kept them busy with worksheets and assignments, but they weren’t critically thinking or growing intellectually.”

About two years later, after some curriculum revision and a change in the department leadership, Kelly was permitted to access the books that were boxed away. She claims that it was at this point that the teaching and learning in her class began. After implementing the novels that the previous department head considered too controversial, Kelly noticed a change in her students and in the culture of her classroom. She expressed, “Students were happy to simply come to class and read and discuss the

literature....they were engaged. We started to have passionate discussions because there were more issues to discuss that they actually cared about and they didn't mind writing because they wanted to react and express themselves in relation to the novels." This teacher reported that students were "surprised" at first that they were reading about issues relating to murder, drugs, and incest, but because they were interested and engaged they seemed make major contributions to the class. She explained,

During the reading of *Monster* (Myers, 1999), students were creating their own differentiated projects to present, planned mock trials, researched famous trials, compared it to ...*Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) and created a multimedia project called 'Injustice in the Justice System: Then and Now' ...Students worked together and bonded over the drama of the plot events and even acted out scenes that were most dramatic and memorable.

Kelly did add that she could have planned these projects and related to any piece of literature; however, she feels that the students were drawn in by the controversial topics and that because of the high-interest material, most of the assignments were student created and facilitated. She stated,

A teacher can try to create a certain climate in their classroom at the start of the year, but a group of students and the feel of a class will really change once a teacher provides students with challenging material that makes them think...I find that most of the challenging material has controversial themes...this is what reaches them enough to make them want to think, learn, question, and to maybe even influence them for the better.

The researcher was interested in learning more about the projects that the students created and was happy when she said that, as her artifact, she brought along a copy of the video that two students made that compares and contrasts the justice system portrayed in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) and in *Monster* (Myers, 1999). Kelly was asked her to explain the contents and the main ideas of the video. She reported,

The students wanted to feature how injustices in our justice system occurred in the past and are still occurring today. Included in the video are photos of actual people who were wrongly accused of crimes and captions that explain their sentences... There is this great transition in the video from highlighting the fictional plot events of both books to information about actual wrongly accused or wrongly sentenced criminals like the Scottsboro Boys in the 1930's to the present day Scott Sisters from Mississippi... There is music from different time periods and inspirational quotes from Lincoln and Dr. King... I am glad that the books inspired them to think beyond just the fictional pages.

Kelly added that the students who created the video, happened to be two at-risk, African American boys who were not very motivated to read the material, but once they came up with the idea for the project, they were reading frantically to find comparisons and evidence. She also added that they never used the video technology before, but sought help from other students who they never would have talked to otherwise. She said, "It was great to see different groups of kids working together and succeeding together. We showed the video to the other classes and they were all so proud of themselves."

Influence of curricular changes on students. The investigator continued by asking Kelly if she thought that the characters in the novels affect the lives of the middle school students and their ability to make decisions in and out of the classroom. She responded,

Students tell me that the reason why they like the books we read is not because of the controversy, but because the characters are realistic. So, I think that the kids can be influenced by them. It is hard to tell if changes are really taking place in their lives based on the characters, but it is possible. Like, for example, I think that the boys who did the injustice project were so interested and motivated because they know, as Black males, that they can maybe find themselves in a situation like Tom Robinson. They may know friends or family members who were not given a chance based on their race.

Kelly believes that maybe if they are exposed to more young adult literature, students will become more apt to relate their actions to those of the characters, but she feels that when they are on the streets, they probably aren't thinking of the latest book they read. She said, "I think that there is a big divide between what goes on in school and what survival techniques are used outside of the classroom. I doubt they're asking themselves, 'What would Atticus Finch do in this situation?' It doesn't mean that we can't try." She does believe that we need to try to provide students with as many positive influences as we can, even if the role models are fictional and are from books. She thinks that because some of her students do not have strong connections with the adults in their lives and bad

connections with the peers in their lives, maybe they can connect with characters who might be experiencing similar struggles.

Kelly also explained that she noticed more patience among the students in class, especially when they have class discussions. Although she is unsure if this is because of any character's influence, but after they read a powerful section or piece from a Holocaust survivor, they do seem to practice more patience, sensitivity and are even more quiet around one another. She added, "I noticed that the students look at each other more during discussions...they listen more...they verbalize or gesture when they agree with another student that they normally would talk to."

The researcher then asked Kelly if she believes that the novels she has integrated made a difference in the lives of her students and what themes they are learning to help them make connections between their lives and society. She responded that she has students who are now inspired to learn more. She said,

It's like I created monsters. They aren't content with what we learned in class because we just skimmed the surface and they realized how much they still don't know...They start researching about real trials like Tom's or Steve's...They are reading about death camps we didn't have time to learn about in class...They are extending their knowledge beyond the text and that is good. I want them to learn about the good and bad in society and hopefully they will have more a thirst for knowledge and it will open up their world.

She also explained that most of the literature that she assigns includes the recurring theme of tolerance. She feels that the students in the present school where she teaches need to

learn to be more tolerant. Kelly stated, “When we read accounts from Holocaust survivors, students begin to understand the importance of being tolerant. They can see that it is wrong to kill millions of people because of their religion, but I think they still have trouble relating to their lives.” She went on to discuss an experience that she highlighted during the focus group interview. She explained,

I wanted the students to learn about tolerance through the experience of the Holocaust survivors, but I also wanted to create lessons and assignments that would allow them to become more tolerant of one another in the class. It was a challenge to get the students to share intimate feeling about themselves and their struggles in comparison to the experience of Holocaust survivors...It was like a *Freedom Writers* (Gruwell, 1999) thing...but it worked. Students read from journals and shared feelings that they wouldn't have shared before...they admitted to hating Jews and Muslims for no apparent reasons. We were treading turbulent waters and it was a little scary...we had a few interventions and consciousness raising sessions. It was worth the time because I saw students change before my eyes.

Kelly believes that her goal is to make a student come-of-age through the literature and understand others in world who are coming-of-age in similar ways. She hopes that, through the reading of this literature, students realize that people are more alike than different.

Challenges and successes of curricular changes. When Kelly was asked about the success that she experienced when integrating YA literature, she reported that any success that she had was because of her students' abilities to share and learn as much as they did. She said, "There is one of me and eighty of them...I succeeded through their accomplishments." She shared that over half of her students last year performed better on the PSSA in reading and she feels that they progressed because they were actually reading in her class. She said, "Because they liked what they were reading, they were motivated to read more. They were also using reading strategies to make connections and interpretations." Kelly added,

In the past, I felt all of this pressure to make sure that my students did well on the test. I copied every PSSA packet that I found. I used workbooks, internet sites, and I assigned practice tests and look-a-like tests weekly. I wondered why they didn't progress like they should have. I realize now that I just have to provide them with good literature and a high-quality lesson that is aligned with the standards. If the students are provided with tools, they will succeed.

Her goal is to ensure that all of her students are proficient and advanced on the reading assessment by next year.

Because of the success that she experienced with a few older YA titles, she was inspired after our focus group discussion to return to her district and present to her principal, department head, and assistant superintendent the benefits of purchasing more current, controversial young adult novels for the library, the after school book club, and the classroom novel units. The challenge came when she requested to add additional

titles to the book list and asked for funding for the books. Although there are teachers in her district who have ordered books with permission from the department head only, she thought that she would request a meeting with all of the stakeholders in order to stress the importance of getting more current YA books in the hands of the students. She explains,

The principal told me that there was government funding that I can use to purchase the newer books for the classroom, but they didn't feel that there was room in the curriculum to add any more novels. He also said that the entire curriculum review board would have to read and vote on every book that was placed in the curriculum for a classroom read since the books feature some controversial issues.

Although Kelly understands that there may be a long process to go through, she knows that other teachers have "snuck" books in without a committee approving them because they were fearful that they wouldn't be approved. Most importantly, this teacher explained that she is not giving up and plans to present to the curriculum review board next month. She said,

I hope to provide students with more controversial literature because it teaches them about the realities of life...My students deserve it...I am dedicated to continuing the discussion with my administrators and curriculum directors because this literature needs to be included in the curriculum and not just 'snuck' in or 'hidden' as if we are keeping it a secret.

Kelly ended her interview by sharing that she has probably learned just as much from this interview process as the investigator has and feels that the reflecting that she did will be

beneficial to her professional growth and to her future students. She shared that, although she has been teaching for thirteen years, she is truly still the student at heart who is learning every day.

All of the participants shared their perspectives with passion and enthusiasm and indicated, after our interviews, that they felt energized to continue to include high-interest, controversial young adult literature into their classrooms in order to promote a positive classroom culture. These teachers believe that without implementing this type of literature many beneficial lessons wouldn't take place and lively discussions wouldn't ensue in their classrooms. They explained that through the integration of controversial young adult literature, a positive classroom culture was established and students felt like a part of an integral and purposeful learning community.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter begins with an overview of each of the preceding chapters and includes a description of the problem, the literature review, and the procedures of the study. The second section of the chapter focuses on the conclusions of the study, which are organized around the initial research questions. It concludes with recommendations and suggestions for further research.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore practicing middle school teachers' perspectives on their decision to incorporate controversial young adult literature into their classroom, describe how their decision affects the curriculum, and reveal teachers' perceptions concerning the integration of this literature into their middle school classroom as a means to change or influence their classroom culture. The qualitative design for this research study emerged from the questions presented for study.

A review of the related literature was presented in Chapter Two, beginning with an overview of bibliotherapy and how the theory of critical literacy relates to the integration of young adult and controversial young adult literature in the middle school classroom. Next, there is a discussion relating to the effects of critical literacy and how the literature that is implemented in a curriculum can influence the culture of a middle school classroom. Then, there is a description of the characteristics of middle school readers and an examination of the ways the middle school language arts curriculum can be reshaped with literature. The chapter continues with a discussion of research on the teaching of young adult literature and controversial young adult literature and how it

affects adolescent readers. Although there have been studies that have examined the integration of young adult literature into the classroom, there is little evidence of how the teaching of controversial young adult literature affects adolescent readers and how it can affect the culture of their learning environment. Based on past studies, it is evident that there is need for a study that further explores teachers' perspectives on the implementation of controversial young adult literature into the middle school classroom (Alvermann et al., 1999; Bean & Harper, 2006; Bean & Moni, 2003; Behrman, 2006; Kornfeld & Prothro, 2005; Lesley, 1997; Lewis & Fabos, 2000; McGregor, 2000; Morocco & Hindon, 2002; Rogers, 2002; Stevens, 2001; Tobin, 2000; Young, 2001; Wolk, 2009). Furthermore, there is little research that has been conducted relating to the influence of controversial young adult literature on a classroom's culture.

The procedures for the study were discussed in Chapter Three. The in-service teachers selected for this study were middle school teachers of language arts, located through a local theatre's teacher-training program and/or Adopt-a-School program, and identified themselves as teachers who integrate controversial young adult literature into their curricula. This study consisted of two focus groups interviews of four teachers each and five individual in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Both sets of interview questions were based on the findings from the literature on the topics and were provided to participants prior to each interview. As opposed to an explanation of middle school teachers' views on controversial young adult literature and classroom culture, the goal of this study is to explore and describe the teachers' perspectives on controversial young adult literature and its effect on a middle school classroom culture. As a part of the individual interview, participants were asked to bring artifacts that consist of a copy of a

sample of student work and a concrete or abstract metaphor or symbol that represents their perspectives on controversial young adult literature and classroom culture.

The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Verbal responses from the interviews were coded and the data was categorized to find underlying themes and ideas. The artifacts that the participants submitted, as well as the verbal reflections concerning these artifacts, were analyzed in Chapter Four in order to find common themes and ideas that related to the teachers' perceptions concerning classroom culture and controversial young adult literature. Data were analyzed with the following theories of critical literacy as a backdrop. The findings were validated by the themes that emerged across the data in comparison to the information presented in the literature. Findings were written in the form of cases on each participant's perception of how their classroom culture has been affected by controversial young adult literature. Each case study was organized around the key questions posed by the study.

Conclusions

Professionals in careers other than education may feel that teachers can be a difficult group of people to work with. They are too opinionated, too passionate, too adamant, and often don't feel supported or appreciated. Ironically, these are the reasons that make teachers a wonderful group of people to interact with. Although research study interviews are to be extremely professional in nature and scientific, the two discussion groups conducted were filled with laughter, tears, hugs, a-ha moments, and a way to solidify and record thoughts, experiences, and ideas. After focus group discussions, these teachers reported that they finally felt validated, heard, and even empowered. Teachers, who didn't even know one another, came together and had an immediate bond. Effective

teachers love to talk about teaching, their students, and their ideas. The two-hour focus groups interviews turned into a three and then a four-hour consciousness-raising experience that left the investigator and the participants feeling energized and invigorated about teaching high-quality literature in the classroom.

The conclusions in this section reflect themes and patterns that emerged from the questions asked by the researcher during the focus and individual interviews that were formulated by the literature and based on the major research questions. Because of the size and nature of this study, the findings may not be generalizable to middle school language arts teachers as a population. Data pertaining to the specific research questions follow.

Research Question One - How do Teachers Define Classroom Culture and what Metaphors and Symbols will they use in these Descriptions? In Addition, to what Extent do Aspects of Critical Literacy Theory Emerge from the Teachers' Perspectives on their Classroom Culture?

The results of the study support much of the research regarding classroom culture. All of the participants in this study agree that a classroom culture needs to be positive. Similarly, the researchers on the subject agree that in order to provide an optimal learning community for their students, teachers need to properly build this community of learners by fostering a positive classroom culture that will motivate students to better relate to themselves, each other, and the world (Bock, 1997; Bulach et al., 2008; Erwin, 2004; Finnan et al., 2003; Gambrell, 1996; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000; Intrator, 2003; Khalsa, 2007; Levine, 2003; Mahar, 2001; Owen, 2007; Velliotis, 2008).

Although participants in each focus group believe that a classroom's culture has to be positive, they defined classroom culture in varying ways. Although Finnan et al. (2003), believe that a classroom culture focuses on the shared beliefs, values, roles, relationships, and responsibilities of members of a classroom community, they have reported that there are many other qualities that teachers and students possess that can influence the culture of a classroom. Table 7 indicates that four of the eight participants in the focus group interviews, plus the participant who was the only individual interview participant who was not a part of a focus group, believe that classroom culture relates to the level of respect between teachers and students and among all of the students in the classroom. The other participants had a slightly different definition and indicated that a classroom's culture relates primarily to the feeling that is created in the classroom as opposed to the way it looks. The responses from the participants also related to the characteristics that teachers and students need to possess in order to create a positive classroom culture. Almost half of the participants indicated the importance of students and even teachers sharing their feelings and views in a classroom and also having a shared goal or belief system that strengthens the classroom community. The views of Sergiovani (1999, 2004, 2005) are similar since he also refers to classroom culture as the shared beliefs, values, roles, relationships, and responsibilities of a classroom environment. In addition, Brendtro et al. (1990) noted that positive classroom culture supports each student's need to belong, master his or her environment, develop his or her independence, and develop his or her generosity. Similarly, by promoting a sense of togetherness, members of a class will begin to feel a sense of belonging to a group and in turn, establish a class spirit (Bergin, 1999). In agreement with these theorists, other

participants explained that a teacher who would want to promote a positive classroom culture would allow students to have ownership or a stake in the classroom and encourage them to be independent, leaders, and individuals. Furthermore, participants expressed that students contributing to a positive classroom culture should feel trusted, comfortable, and free to express themselves. The literature on classroom culture also indicates that students who feel that they belong to a group have power in decision-making and have freedom of choices (Tunney, 1996). As a result, students should develop a process of understanding, sharing, compassion and empathy (David & Capraro, 2001). Therefore, a positive classroom culture provides each child with space to develop specific capabilities and to experiences a sense of inner balance and wholeness in a community with others (Easton, 1997). The researcher concluded that the participants' overall understanding of classroom culture was supported by the views of a variety of experts.

Table 7

Definitions of Classroom Culture

Participant	Views of Classroom Culture	Regarding Students	Regarding Teachers	Metaphor or Symbol
Sara	Respect portrayed Interactions	Sharing thoughts and feeling	Modeling	Team
Jill	Respect portrayed Common goals Compassion	Sharing thoughts and feelings	Trusting	Globe
Kevin	Respect portrayed Family Community	Sharing thoughts and feelings Ownership	Sharing thoughts and feelings	Family
Kelly	Respect portrayed Community	Sharing thoughts and feelings Ownership	Courtesy Promoting independence	Alternate World
Becky	Feeling created Relationships	Comfortableness	Promoting Independence	Bird
Tracy	Feeling created	Learning independently	Leading Differentiating	Chameleon
Sue	Feeling created Common goals Positive expectations	Ownership Leading	Promoting individuality	Tree
Melissa	Feeling created	Ownership Comfortableness	Guiding	Northern Star
Mandy	Respect portrayed Creating guidelines	Freedom of thought Inspiring others	Observing	Sun

While the participants expressed their views on the ways in which controversial young adult literature influenced their classroom culture, aspects of critical literacy theory also emerged from their responses. Stevens & Bean (2007) discuss the importance of engaging students in class discussion in order for young people to be aware of power, privilege, and oppression in our society. Actually, almost all of the participants expressed the importance of having engaging classroom discussions about the themes and conflicts that arise from the controversial young adult literature that they include in their middle school language arts curriculum. Because of the engaging class discussions that these teachers reported having with their students, the students were able to create a democratic environment in their classrooms, adopt a questioning stance, and discuss controversial issues relating to war, race, class, and social justice (McDaniel, 2004). During these discussions, students were able to draw their own conclusions and interpret and analyze ideas independently. For example, Jill feels that through discussion, students can learn gain the courage to agree or disagree with another person in a respectable manner.

In addition, these teachers practiced critical pedagogy techniques by providing students the opportunity to choose the books that they read and provided them the power to speak and write in relation to their feelings and reactions. For instance, Kelly encourages students to be independent thinkers and to question each other instead of relying on her for the answers. Wink (2000) suggests this and believes that students and teachers must continually challenge long-held assumptions, find new answers for new questions, grapple with multiple ways of knowing, and listen, learn, reflect, and act. Meanwhile, participants from the second focus group express their belief that students

gain power and control through writing, speaking, and listening. These participants explained how they use literature to encourage their students to make connections between their lives, the lives of others and the lives of the characters similar to the way Shannon (1995) describes critical literacy as a means of understanding one's own history or culture, to recognize connections between one's life and the social structures.

Kelly shared how her students learned, through controversial young adult literature, how wrong it is to judge others in society based on their differences. The participating teachers also explained how some students learned, grew, and changed over time and how the lessons of the literature positively influenced the behavior of the students in their classrooms. McDaniel (2004) explains that critical literacy encourages readers to work toward changing themselves and their world and Becky, Sue, and Melissa explained that their students were empowered to make a change in their schools and communities after reading selected controversial young adult literature relating to the Holocaust and bullying. Overall, many of the theories that emerged relating to critical literacy were supported by the literature on the topic.

Research Question Two - To what Extent do Characteristics of Controversial Young Adult Literature Selections Influence Classroom Culture and the Curriculum and to what Extent do Teachers Include this type of Literature? In Addition, what Curricular Changes are made in order to Integrate this type of Literature?

This research found that the responses from the participants correlated with the literature in relation to how controversial young adult literature influence the classroom culture and the curriculum. Christensen (2000) discovered that by integrating high-interest reading material for her adolescent students and promoting critical literacy

practices, her classroom culture was altered significantly. In agreement with Christensen, participants in this study all agreed that if high-interest and high-quality content and reading materials are provided for students, the culture of a classroom will be more positive.

The participants in the first focus group suggested that the correctly chosen content can increase discussion, teach group dynamics, teach students lessons that can benefit the class environment, encourage a respect, tolerance, and empathy for others, and can even be therapeutic. Wolk (2009) noted that by the implementation of selected young adult texts in the curriculum, students can learn how to be more caring and empathetic, deal with social problems and social justice issues, become aware of multiculturalism, and global issues. More importantly, the culture of the classroom will begin to change for the better since the students will be able to make connections between the characters in the literature and the classmates sitting next to them. This study's participants agreed that the content alone cannot mend a classroom that is broken or suffering from a lack of student interest, behavior problems, apathy, or disrespect; however, the right piece of literature for that specific student or group of students can contribute to a more positive learning atmosphere.

All of the participants believe in Blasingame's (2007) principles in relation to the types of books to which adolescents should be exposed. Most importantly, these participants feel that students should be provided with books that match their reading levels, that they feel connected to, that relate to their world and expand that view of their world, and that depicts issues that they might be facing. Most of the participants' responses further related to Blasingame's principles. Kelly, Becky, and Tracy all

explained the importance of students expanding their views of the world and how that can influence their lives in and out of the classroom. In addition, Christensen (2000) explains that she chooses literature selections that intentionally makes students look beyond their world. Through reading this type of literature, students can read about characters that are different than themselves and that can influence how they treat others in school and in the larger society. Most importantly, a student can empathize with someone who might be different than him or her. In agreement, Probst (1988) agrees that the discussion of the text should reveal different responses, different senses of the work that might awaken readers to the uniqueness of the others in their class. Concurring with these researchers, Kevin, Sue, and Melissa described the importance of engaging and motivating students with a piece of literature in order to promote good classroom discussions and class activities which led to students acting more empathetic and respectful toward others in the class.

The research concludes that the discourse that is aroused in a classroom from young adult literature can greatly influence the culture of that classroom (Busching & Slesinger, 2002; Intrator, 2003; Schein, 2008). Mandy and Jill believe that controversial young adult literature could teach students the difference between right and wrong and hopefully influence their future decisions in a positive way. A few of the participants discussed how students can and have learned from the decisions that the characters in the literature make and in turn, can positively influence the behavior of an adolescent in and out of the classroom. In the literature on the topic, Intrator (2003) discussed student reactions to their classmate who made connections between his life and the lives of the characters and how their behavior was influenced in a positive way.

Participants explained how they used the themes from the literature to teach students life lessons, race relations, the dangers of drugs, revenge, the realities of war, violence, and the effects of suicide. In addition, Sara and Kelly explained that her students learned better group dynamics when reading controversial young adult literature since the novels initiated interesting class discussions. Kevin described choosing a piece of literature based on the fact that some of his students were not getting along. Sue, Tracy, and Becky wanted students to feel connected to the class and motivated by the material that they are reading. Similar to the views of the participants, Busching & Slesinger (2002) concluded that literacy study and literature is the starting place for student exploration of society that brings to students the lives of other people and the conditions that affect these lives. The participating teachers reported using this type of literature in order to meet the needs of their students academically, socially, or behaviorally; however, they wanted to make clear that the teacher, not the material, needs to be the key source that builds a positive culture in a classroom.

In order to implement this type of literature, most participants reported that they did not need to seek approvals and have the autonomy to add a new piece of literature into their curriculum; however, funding is rarely available for the purchase of new novels to teach in the classroom. Sara, Jill, and Kevin claimed that as long as funding is available for the purchase of a new book, they would be able to order it regardless of the title. Because of financial restrictions, they have to be creative with the material that they already have and have hopes of implementing more current young adult titles. Becky, on the other hand, is restricted to teaching the books that have been approved by the school board; however, once she is through with the required material, she has the freedom to

choose from a variety of high-interest young adult books that meet the needs of her students. Surprisingly, Tracy, Sue, and Melissa reported that there are no guidelines or parameters set up for the integration of new literature taught in the classrooms. Sue has never been questioned about a purchase or even denied, but explained that there is simply a lack of interest in what the students are reading from those granting her requests.

Research Question Three - How do Teachers Describe their Classroom Culture Before and After they Integrated Controversial Young Adult Literature into their Classroom?

Each of the study's participants explained that a change occurred in them and in their students after they integrated this type of literature. They also described changes in their classroom culture as well. Table 8 highlights the descriptions that the participants gave regarding the integration of controversial young adult literature. Research indicates that classroom culture relates to classroom dimensions, such as inclusive instruction, understanding students, mutual respect, involvement in learning, meaningful learning, authenticity, behavioral self-control, instruction as dialogue, active knowledge construction, cooperation, connectedness, empowerment, and diversity. It is reported that all of these dimensions are pertinent when attempting to "reculture" classrooms and schools (Finnan et al. 2003) and most of these dimensions were expressed by the study's participants.

Kelly, Tracy, Mandy and Sue all explained that most of their students became more interested or enthusiastic about the their class or the material after they integrated controversial young adult literature into their curriculum. Because of this change, the culture of the classroom became more positive. If a teacher has built and promotes a

positive classroom through high-interest young adult literature, students will feel safe, supported, and enthusiastic about the discoveries each new school day will bring. It is a place where every individual is honored and where a sense of interdependence is built into the culture (Levin, 2003).

Table 8

Descriptions of Influence of Controversial Young Adult Literature on Classroom Culture

Participant	Description of Classroom Culture	Description of Classroom Culture
	Before the Integration of Controversial Young Adult Literature	After the Integration of Controversial Young Adult Literature
Sara	Isolated	Students connected with characters, then with others in class
Jill	Students not opening up; narrow-minded Not connected Teacher did not provide choices	New relationships formed; more open-minded Better class discussions Students talked to teacher and to each other Students made connections with each other while analyzed novel Teacher provided students more power, control, and choice
Kevin	Students lacked motivation to read Students lacked interest in class	Students interest in reading increased New community built Better class discussions Students' grades increased Students shared opinions Students connected to characters
Kelly	Students made prejudicial statements	Better class discussions
Kelly	Students made prejudicial statements Boring Negative	Better class discussions Students' writing became more reflective Students worked better in groups -Students became more open-minded

Becky	Students made racist jokes	Students became more empathetic
	Students lacked interest in class	Students learned from characters
	Students felt isolated, separated	Students created school-wide project assignment
Tracy	Students lacked interest in class	Students became more vocal
	Students not opening up	Students became more interested
	Students made stereotypical comments	Students became avid readers
	Students made racist jokes	Material demystified stereotypes Students emulated good behavior of characters and learned from mistakes of characters
Sue	Quiet	Students became more excited; involved
	Uncomfortable	Students acted more mature
	Withdrawn	Students shared views and fears
	Awkward	Students created school-wide and community service project Students learned from characters
Melissa	Students had some behavior problems	Students identified with characters
	Apathetic	Students shared thoughts Students created service project
Mandy	Confused	Students connected with characters
	Isolated	Students became more enthusiastic
	Student seemed bored	Students were more interested in class
	Students were unattentive	Better discussions, shared feelings
	Teacher as leader and director	Teacher as facilitator and observer

Out of the nine participants, seven of them described the way their students were positively influenced by a character in young adult literature and the ways that influenced

the classroom's culture. Most of the participants reported that their students learned from these characters like they would learn from real people. Characters taught the students life lessons and right from wrong. From the participants responses, it is clear that some "students lend part of themselves to the stories as they read them: they become part of the world of the characters in the books, but their perceptions of that world are colored by their own experiences....they emerge from the fictional worlds with a better understanding of their own" (Kornfeld & Prothro, 2005, p. 221). It was indicated by the explanations of Kelly, Becky, and Tracy that their students learned, after reading selected controversial young adult literature, to be less judgmental, stereotypical, and prejudice. Similarly, Christensen (2000) stated, by putting students inside the lives of others, they begin to develop understanding about people in history, literature, or down the hallway, whose culture, race, gender, or sexual orientation differs from theirs. In addition, seven of the participants described that their students connected, shared, or became more empathetic once changes in the curriculum occurred. These teachers expressed how the literature encouraged the students to create a new community in the classroom that was built on a shared belief (Finnan et al. 2003). Similarly, Noddings (1991) and Wolk (2009) explained the importance of our schools teaching students the ability to share and connect with each other and how caring should be at the foundations of our curriculums.

Almost all of the participants, at one time or another during the study, discussed the importance of class discussions and how the discourse in the class became more interesting, impacting, and thought-provoking once controversial young adult literature was implemented. Most of the responses from the participants correlated with the idea that good literature can be a catalyst to stir connections in and give meaning to students'

own lives, but it is really the text that creates the context for conversation in a classroom and the students, if the proper culture is created, are the catalysts that stir the connectedness (Intrator, 2003). Their responses also echoed the fact that the discourse that is aroused in a classroom from young adult literature can greatly influence the culture of that classroom (Busching & Slesinger, 2002; Intrator, 2003; Schein, 2008).

As a result of the integration of controversial young adult literature, Kelly, Becky, Sue, and Melissa all describe students who felt empowered and inspired to create class assignments, school-wide projects, and community service activities that reflected the themes of social justice that were found in the literature that they were reading. These changes in the curriculum not only positively altered classroom culture, but also influenced the lives of the readers and the students and community members around them. Wolk (2009) believes that “teaching for social responsibility with good books...redefines the purpose of school and empowers all of us—students, teachers, administrators, parents—to be better people and live more fulfilling lives. And in that process we create individuality and collectively, a more caring and thoughtful and democratic society. It all starts with a book.” (p. 672).

Implications and Recommendations

The results of the study suggest the following:

1. The teachers in the study defined and described classroom culture in a variety of ways, but they all agreed that students should learn in a positive learning community that promotes mutual respect. Some of the participants believe that by the promotion of a positive classroom culture,

students will be more apt to learn the skills required to be more empathetic, respectful, and tolerant.

2. Critical literacy is promoted in and out of the classroom when controversial young adult literature is implemented into the curriculum. Although theories of critical literacy emerged from the responses of the participants, the teachers interviewed were not familiar with the teachings of critical literacy in a language arts class. Pre-service and in-service teachers should familiarize themselves with the benefits of teaching strategies that promote critical literacy (McDaniel, 2004; Semali & Pailliotet, 1999; Shannon, 1995; Stevens & Bean, 2007; Wink, 2000).
3. A classroom's culture is positively influenced after controversial young adult literature is implemented.
4. There are teachers who are apprehensive about including controversial young adult literature into the curriculum and are also apprehensive about meeting challenges after integrating this literature. Although they may feel that the literature will be beneficial for students to read, they would rather avoid teaching the book in order to prevent any issues with parents or administrators. In contrast, most participants reported a lack of interest from parents and school officials in relation to teachings of young adult literature in middle school language arts classes. It is recommended that teachers of English and language arts familiarize themselves with the ways in which book challenges are handled in districts throughout their state and what policies are in place.

5. Although high-interest young adult literature can be beneficial to students, districts need to provide teachers the time to alter their curricula so that controversial, yet high-quality YA material is legitimately included on reading lists proving that schools are dedicated to providing students with reading materials that they can learn from and that can relate to their lives.
6. Better policies and guidelines need to be formed in order to integrate high-quality young adult literature into the middle school language arts curriculum. Most of the participants in this study indicated that their school districts either did not have guidelines for implementing new books into the middle school language arts curriculum or they did not follow them.
7. Professional development should be provided for administrators, school leaders and pre-service and in-service teachers on the benefits of implementing controversial young adult literature into the classroom and the proper ways to teach the themes and content. For example, teachers might feel unprepared to guide their students in deep, reflective conversations that might arise from the literature (Freedman & Johnson, 2000). Furthermore, most participants complained about their districts not having the money to add additional books to the curriculum. If teachers, administrators, and school leaders learned more about the benefits of middle school students reading this literature, perhaps more funds can be budgeted for the purchase of these books.

8. The participants in this study were limited to implementing older titles because of funding constraints; however, teachers of language arts should also seek out high-quality, contemporary, controversial young adult novels that relate to the lives of their students.

Suggestions for Future Research

The researcher suggests that a larger sample of teachers from a variety of middle schools be studied to test whether the conclusions drawn from this study regarding teachers' perceptions concerning their decision to incorporate controversial young adult literature into their classroom, how it affects the curriculum, and whether it changes the classroom culture or if it remains stable. This study should be replicated drawing samples from teachers practicing in urban, suburban, and rural middle school sites to examine the influence of environment and school context on teachers' perspectives of controversial young adult literature. A further study should highlight how the gender, years of service, and personal experience of a teacher influence their decision to integrate this literature into their classroom and the activities that they chose to incorporate with the chosen material.

Furthermore, a longitudinal study that followed a group of educators through their teaching of multiple units of study would provide insights into the stability of beliefs with respect to this topic. Research should also be extended to administrators and board members to better understand their perspectives on the topic relating to this literature and how their leadership decisions influence the curriculum or classroom culture. It is also suggested that a study be conducted using middle school students to examine their beliefs concerning change within a classroom culture after the implementation of young adult

controversial literature within a specific classroom or school context. Although this study included samples of student work and teachers' comments as they recalled the perspectives of their students, a study that highlights students' perspectives would also be beneficial.

Closing Considerations

This study, which dealt with teachers' perspectives on controversial young adult literature and how it may change a middle school's classroom culture, has significant implications for pre-service and in-service teacher and administrative education. For example, since the study's participants expressed that the implementation of this literature is beneficial to students, teachers need to learn the best ways to teach this literature and the ways to combat censorship challenges that may arise in and out of the classroom. In addition, school leaders need to understand the trials and tribulations that this literature can present in a classroom so that they can properly create and enforce policies relating to curricular change in order to encourage and support the teacher and students in their schools.

Although there have been studies that have examined the integration of young adult literature into the classroom, there is little evidence of how the teaching of controversial young adult literature affects adolescent readers and how it can affect the culture of their learning environment. Based on past studies, it is evident that there is need for a study that further explores teachers' perspectives on the implementation of controversial young adult literature into the middle school classroom. Furthermore, there is little research that has been conducted relating to the influence of controversial young adult literature on a classroom's culture. This research just began to reveal the extent to

which teachers believe that controversial young adult literature affects their classroom culture and since the participants expressed that it is beneficial, perhaps this research will encourage more teachers to integrate controversial young adult literature into their middle school language arts curricula. This study is only a beginning, but the insights and perspectives may open new discussions within the communities of curriculum and instruction.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Focus Group Discussion Questions

Thank you for taking the time to take part in this focus group interview concerning controversial young adult literature and middle school classroom culture. This discussion, guided by 17 questions, will take approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes. Your remarks will be audio-taped and transcribed. After the transcription is typed, the file will be kept in a password-protected file on the interviewer's computer. The data gathered will be used exclusively for the purposes of the study. You are encouraged to speak freely and I assure you that your responses will be held in strict confidence. Please do not refer to your school, students, colleagues, or administrators by name.

1. Blasingame (2007) indicates that there are five principles concerning the types of books that young adults need to read. Adolescents should be given the opportunity to read books (1 about characters to whom they can relate, (2 that depict issues that they might be facing, (3 that are accessible, interesting, well-written, and appropriately matched to a student's level, (4 that relate to the diversity of an adolescent's world and expand their view of the world, (5 and that helps them make sense of their world and understand human behavior. Do you agree with these principles?
2. How do you distinguish between young adult literature and controversial young adult literature?
3. How do you decide if a piece of literature is a "high-quality" piece of literature?
4. What parameters do teachers have to select the literature they teach in their classroom and how much choice do teachers have in this matter?
5. What types of controversial young adult literature do you choose to include in your curriculum?
6. Why do you choose to include controversial young adult literature in your classroom?
7. Explain the challenges you have faced concerning the integration of this type of literature in your classroom.
8. Explain the successes you have had concerning the integration of this type of literature into your classroom.
9. What measures have you taken to ensure that your students benefit from the themes and topics included in the literature?
10. How have the themes and topics in the novels affected the students' views of the world around them?
11. How do you define classroom culture?
12. How have the themes presented in the novels inspired or encouraged caring, empathy, and respect among middle school students?
13. How much of an influence does the curricular content that is taught have on the culture of your classroom?
14. How would you characterize the culture of your classroom?
15. Explain the ways in which your classroom culture is altered after you integrate controversial young adult literature into your curriculum.

16. Please share a story about your experience integrating controversial into your classroom.
17. Please share a metaphor or a symbol that represents your classroom's culture.

I will now go around the group and ask for any further comments or observations that would be relevant to your perspectives on teaching controversial young adult literature and its influence on classroom culture.

Appendix B

Individual Interview Questions

Thank you for taking the time to take part in this individual interview concerning controversial young adult literature and middle school classroom culture. This topical interview, guided by 10 questions, will take approximately 1 hour. Your remarks will be audio-taped and transcribed by the researcher. After the transcription is typed, the cassette tape will be locked in the interviewer's home. The data gathered will be used exclusively for the purposes of the study. You are encouraged to speak freely and I assure you that your responses will be held in strict confidence. Please do not refer to your school, students, colleagues, or administrators by name.

1. What controversial young adult novels do you include in your curriculum and how did you go about receiving the permission to assign these readings in your classroom?
2. React to this comment: The content that is taught in a middle school language arts classroom can greatly affect the culture of that learning environment.
3. How does your classroom culture change after you include this literature in your curriculum?
4. How has your decision to include controversial young adult literature in the classroom affected community members, parents, other teachers, and administrators?
5. How do the characters in the novels affect the lives of middle school students and their ability to make decisions in and out of the classroom?
6. Explain the specific challenges you have experienced in altering or changing your language arts curriculum.
7. How has integrating these novels in the middle school curriculum made a difference in the lives of students?
8. How has integrating these novels in the middle school curriculum made a difference in your teaching of writing, grammar, and vocabulary?
9. How do the themes and topics in these novels teach students about social issues and moral lessons and how to make connections between their lives and society?
10. Explain the artifact that you have with you today and how it represents your perspective on controversial young adult literature and how it influences classroom culture.

I will now ask for any further comments or observations that would be relevant to your perspectives on teaching controversial young adult literature and its influence on classroom culture.

Appendix C

Letter Requesting Attendance at Theatre's Teacher-Training

February 1, 2010

Dear Director of Local Theatre,

I am requesting your assistance in providing me the opportunity to attend the teacher-training workshop on February 19, 2010. At the training, I plan on providing the middle school teachers of language arts my contact information and inviting them to be a participant in my research study if they identify themselves as teachers who integrate controversial young adult literature into their curricula. After these teachers contact me via e-mail, identifying themselves as instructors who integrate controversial young adult literature into their classrooms, these teachers will be invited to participate in a research study that explores middle school teachers' perspectives regarding the integration of this type of literature into the classroom and their perceptions on how it influences classroom culture. It is hoped that this research will: (1 reveal the extent to which aspects of controversial young adult literature selections influence classroom culture and the curriculum, and (2 explore teachers' perspectives on classroom culture and how that culture is affected before and after controversial young adult literature is integrated into their classroom.

If they agree to take part in the study, the participants will take part in one of two focus group discussions that will be 2 hours in length and will have an opportunity to volunteer to take part in a 60-minute individual, in-depth, semi-structured interview. Participants will receive both sets of interview questions prior to the interview. As a part of the individual interview, participants will be asked, with student consent, to bring artifacts that consist of a sample of student work and a concrete or abstract metaphor or symbol. These artifacts will represent the participants' perspectives on controversial young adult literature and how it influences classroom culture.

The attendees of the training session at the theater need to know that their participation in this study is strictly voluntary and that they are free to withdraw from the study at any time by filling out the attached form and returning it in the self-addressed stamped envelope or by contacting me via e-mail or telephone. This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (724-357-7730). There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

I would appreciate any help that you can offer me. I enclosed a letter of consent, explaining further details of the focus group interviews, for all or any interested participants. Feel free to e-mail or phone me at your earliest convenience. Your time and cooperation are highly valued and deeply appreciated.

Sincerely,

Bethany L. Fenyus, Doctoral Candidate and Investigator
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412-580-2997
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Appendix D

Brief Description of Study Provided for Prospective Participants

February 1, 2010

Dear Middle School Educator,

As a teacher involved in the theatre's trainings and/or their Adopt-a-School program, I am inviting you to participate in a research study that explores middle school teachers' perspectives regarding the integration of controversial young adult literature into the curriculum and their perceptions on how it influences classroom culture. It is hoped that this research will: (1) reveal the extent to which aspects of controversial young adult literature selections influence classroom culture and the curriculum, and (2) explore teachers' perspectives on classroom culture and how that culture is affected before and after controversial young adult literature is integrated into their classroom.

If you identify yourself as a teacher who integrates controversial young adult literature into the curriculum and you would be interested in taking part of the study, please e-mail me at bfenyus@svsd.k12.pa.us. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research. Your input is critical to the collection of data; however, your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. Even if you agree to be a part of the study, you are free to withdraw at any time and may do so by contacting me via e-mail, telephone, or written letter. If you agree to be included in the study, you will take part in one of two focus group discussions that will last approximately 2 hours and will have the opportunity to later participate in a 60-minute individual, in-depth, semi-structured interview. The focus group interviews, that will take place on February 28, 2009 and March 21, 2009, will consist of a discussion with approximately 5 other teachers of middle school language arts in order to investigate your thoughts and feelings concerning the integration of controversial young adult literature in the classroom.

If you have any questions or require additional information, please feel free to contact me at 412-580-2997 or via e-mail at bfenyus@svsd.k12.pa.us. Your time and cooperation will be highly valued and deeply appreciated.

Sincerely,

Bethany L. Fenyus, Principal Investigator
Indiana University of Pennsylvania
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Appendix E

Letter to Potential Focus Group Participants

February 1, 2010

Dear Middle School Educator,

As a teacher involved in the theatre's trainings and/or Adopt-a-School program and a teacher of middle school language arts who identifies yourself as an instructor who integrates controversial young adult literature into the curriculum, you are invited to participate in a research study that explores middle school teachers' perspectives regarding the integration of this type of literature into the classroom and their perceptions on how it influences classroom culture. It is hoped that this research will: (1) reveal the extent to which aspects of controversial young adult literature selections influence classroom culture and the curriculum, and (2) explore teachers' perspectives on classroom culture and how that culture is affected before and after controversial young adult literature is integrated into their classroom.

The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask. You are eligible to participate because you are a middle school language arts teacher who integrates controversial young adult literature into the curriculum. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research. Your input is critical to the collection of data; however, your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. Even if you agree to be a part of the study, you are free to withdraw at any time and may do so by contacting me via e-mail, telephone, or written letter. Your decision will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Participation or non-participation in this study will not affect your relationship with the investigator at IUP, your employer, or your affiliation with the theatre. Your name will never be divulged nor associated with findings in any way. All information will be kept confidential and incorporated into group data. If you agree to take part in the study, please withhold the specific names of students, teachers, administrators, and schools where you are employed. A summary of the findings from this study will be made available to you upon request. The information obtained in this study may be published in academic journals or presented at conferences, but your identity will be kept strictly confidential. The Indiana University of Pennsylvania supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (724-357-7730).

If you agree to be included in the study, you will take part in one of two focus group discussions that will last approximately 2 hours and will have the opportunity to later participate in a 60-minute individual, in-depth, semi-structured interview. The focus group interview will consist of a discussion with approximately 7 other teachers of middle school language arts in order to investigate your thoughts and feelings concerning the integration of controversial young adult literature in the classroom. The focus group interview questions are included with this letter for you to review if you choose to

participate. You should respond based on your experiences in the field. These interviews will be audio-taped to ensure the quality of responses. The focus group interview will take place in a private room at convenient location. If you choose to participate, please complete and return one copy of this voluntary consent form in the enclosed, stamped envelope. Keep the extra, unsigned copy for your own records. If you have any questions or require additional information, please feel free to contact me at 412-580-2997 or via e-mail at bfenyus@svsd.k12.pa.us. Your time and cooperation are highly valued and deeply appreciated.

Sincerely,

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Appendix F

Consent Form for Focus Group Interview

Voluntary Consent Form: Focus Group Interview

I have read and understand the information provided in the letter and I consent to volunteer to be a participant in a focus group interview. I understand that my responses are completely confidential and that I have the right to withdraw at any time by notifying the researcher via e-mail at bfenyus@svsd.k12.pa.us, via phone at 412-580-2997, or by written letter. I also understand that the interview will be audio-taped. I have received an unsigned copy of this Informed Consent Form to keep in my possession.

Name _____ Signature _____

Phone Number _____ Date _____

E-mail Address _____ Address _____

Best methods, days, and times to reach you _____

I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, the potential benefits, and the possible risks associated with the participation in this study. Additionally, I have addressed any questions raised.

February 1, 2010 Investigator's Signature _____

Appendix G

Letter to Potential Individual Interview Participants

February 1, 2010

Dear Middle School Educator,

Thank you for your participation in a focus group discussion concerning controversial young adult literature and classroom culture. Your input is highly valued and appreciated. You have the opportunity to further participate in this study by taking part in an individual, in-depth interview. This interview will allow you to further explain your thoughts, views, and ideas concerning controversial young adult literature and classroom culture. As a participant in the theatre's trainings and/or their Adopt-a-School program and a teacher of middle school language arts, who integrates young adult literature into the curriculum, you are invited to participate in a research study that explores middle school teachers' perspectives regarding the integration of this type of literature into the classroom and their perceptions on how it influences classroom culture. It is hoped that this research will: (1 reveal the extent to which aspects of controversial young adult literature selections influence classroom culture and the curriculum, and (2 explore teachers' perspectives on classroom culture and how that culture is affected before and after controversial young adult literature is integrated into their classroom.

The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision whether or not to participate in the individual interview. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask. You are eligible to participate because you are a middle school language arts teacher who integrates controversial young adult literature into the curriculum. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research. Your input is critical to the collection of data; however, your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. Even if you agree to be a part of the study, you are free to withdraw at any time and may do so by filling out the attached form and mailing it to me in the stamped envelope provided. Your decision will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Participation or non-participation in this study will not affect your relationship with the investigator at IUP, your employer, or your affiliation with the theater. Your name will never be divulged nor associated with findings in any way. All information will be kept confidential and incorporated into group data. If you agree to take part in the study, please withhold the specific names of students, teachers, administrators, and schools where you are employed. A summary of the findings from this study will be made available to you upon request. The information obtained in this study may be published in academic journals or presented at conferences, but your identity will be kept strictly confidential. The Indiana University of Pennsylvania supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (724-357-7730).

The 60-minute individual interview will be conducted in April or May of 2010 on a day when it is convenient for you. As a part of the individual interview, you will be asked to bring artifacts that consist of a sample of student work and a concrete or abstract metaphor or symbol. Before bringing the student work sample to the interview, be sure that you and the student and their parent fill out and sign the consent form that allows you, the participator in the study, to use the student's work as an example. These artifacts will represent your perspectives on controversial young adult literature and how it influences classroom culture. Considering that you will be bringing a copy of student work as your artifact, please withhold and remove the student's name from the artifact. The interview will investigate your thoughts and feelings concerning the integration of controversial young adult literature in the classroom and you should respond based on your experiences in the field. The interview questions are included with this letter for your review if you choose to participate. The interview will be audio-taped to ensure the quality of responses. To minimize your travel time, the individual interview can take place at a private location of your choice or in the privacy of your own home.

If you choose to participate, please complete and return one copy of this voluntary consent form in the enclosed, stamped envelope. Keep the extra, unsigned copy for your own records. If you choose not to participate, please return the uncompleted consent form in the enclosed envelope. If you have any questions or require additional information, please feel free to contact me at 412-580-2997 or via e-mail at bfenyus@svsd.k12.pa.us. Your time and cooperation are highly valued and deeply appreciated.

Sincerely,

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Appendix H

Consent Form for Individual Interview

Voluntary Consent Form: Individual Interview

I have read and understand the information provided in the letter and I consent to volunteer to be a participant in an individual interview. I understand that my responses are completely confidential and that I have the right to withdraw at any time by notifying the researcher via e-mail at bfenyus@svsd.k12.pa.us, via phone at 412-580-2997, or by written letter. I also understand that the interview will be audio-taped. I have received an unsigned copy of this Informed Consent Form to keep in my possession.

Name _____ Signature _____

Phone Number _____ Date _____

E-mail Address _____ Address _____

Best methods, days, and times to reach you _____

I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, the potential benefits, and the possible risks associated with the participation in this study. Additionally, I have addressed any questions raised.

February 1, 2010 Investigator's Signature _____

Appendix I

Consent Form for Release of Student Work

Voluntary Consent Form: Release of Student Work

I give permission for my teacher to use my work in an interview that he or she is taking part of. My work will be used as a positive example of how the literature that we read in class influences young adult students. I understand that my name will not appear on my work and that no one will know who I am throughout the interview process except for my teacher. I understand that I will not be in danger by providing my work as an example in this study. I also understand that my teacher will return my work to me at the end of the research study or that it might be destroyed. My parent's name and signature has to appear on this form in order for my work to be included in the study. I have received an unsigned copy of this Informed Consent Form to keep in my possession.

Student's
Name _____ Signature _____

Parent's
Name _____ Signature _____

Phone
Number _____ Date _____

I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, the potential benefits, and the possible risks associated with the participation in this study. Additionally, I have addressed any questions raised.

February 1, 2010 Investigator's Signature _____

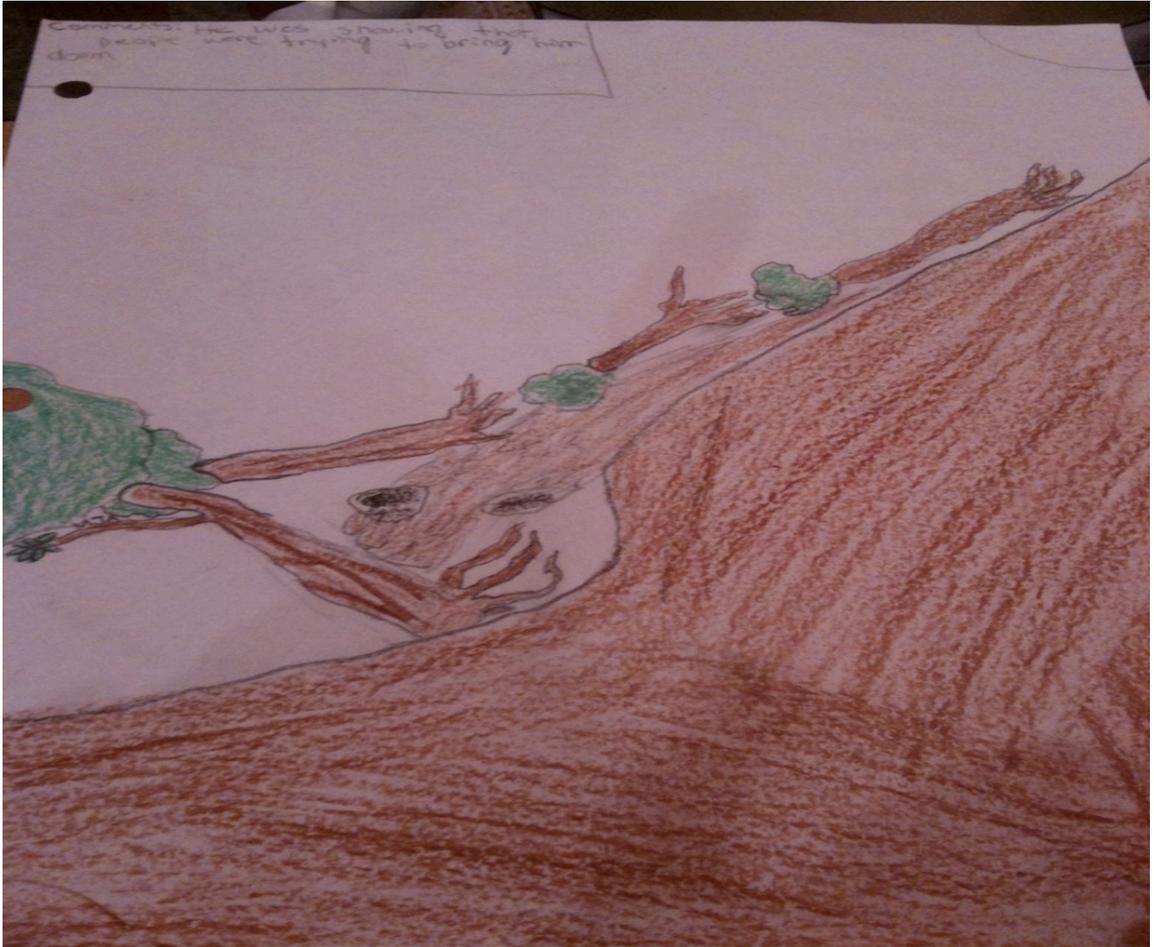
Appendix J

Sample of Student Work: Tree 1



Appendix K

Sample of Student Work: Tree 2



Appendix L

Sample of Student Work: Tree 3



Appendix M

Young Adult Novels Referenced by Participants

Anderson, L. H. (1999). *Speak*. New York: Penguin.

A traumatic event near the end of the summer has a devastating effect on Melinda's freshman year in high school.

Bloor, E. (1997). *Tangerine*. Orlando: Harcourt.

Twelve-year-old Paul, who lives in the shadow of his football hero brother Erik, fights for the right to play soccer despite his near blindness and slowly begins to remember the incident that damaged his eyesight.

Cormier, R. (1974). *The Chocolate War*. New York: Dell Laurel-Leaf.

A student's refusal to sell chocolates during a school fundraiser wouldn't create such a stir, but it does; it's as if the whole school comes apart at the seams. To some, Jerry is a hero, but to others, he becomes a scapegoat--a target for their pent-up hatred.

Flake, S. (1998). *The Skin I'm In*. New York: Hyperion.

Thirteen-year-old Maleeka, uncomfortable because her skin is extremely dark, meets a new teacher with a birthmark on her face and makes some discoveries about how to love, who she is, and what she looks like.

Frank, A. (1947). *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Amsterdam: Contact.

While hiding with her family and family friends in an attic during World War II, A thirteen-year old girl writes openly in her diary about the conflicts that arise while in the attic and about her fears, hopes, and dreams.

Hinton, S. E. (1963). *The Outsiders*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Fourteen-year-old Ponyboy and his friends, consider themselves Greasers, a group that is considered lower on the social ladder. After numerous conflicts with a rival group of boys and a lot of soul-searching, Pony and his friends have to decide if the rivalry should continue.

Hinton, S. E. (1971). *That Was Then, This Is Now*. New York: Penguin Putnam.

Sixteen-year-old Mark and Bryon have been like brothers since childhood, but now, as their involvement with girls, gangs, and drugs increases, their relationship seems to gradually disintegrate.

Keyes, D. (1959). *Flowers for Algernon*. Orlando: Harcourt.

Following his doctor's instructions, engaging simpleton Charlie Gordon tells his own story in semi-literate "progris riports." He dimly wants to better himself, but with an IQ of 68 can't even beat the laboratory mouse Algernon at maze-solving. After experimentation allows him to improve, he faces many challenges before the laboratory mouse begins to deteriorate.

Konigsburg, E. L. (2000). *Silent to the Bone*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

When he was wrongly accused of gravely injuring his baby half sister, thirteen year old Branwell loses his power of speech and only friend Connor is able to reach him and uncover the truth about what really happened.

Lee, H. (1960). *To Kill a Mockingbird*. New York: Grand Central.

While the narrator's father, a lawyer defending an innocent Black man accused of raping a white woman, she and her brother learn the irrationality of adult attitudes toward race and class in the Deep South of the 1930's.

Lowry, L. (1993). *The Giver*. New York: Delacorte Press.

In a world with no poverty, no crime, no sickness, and no unemployment, and where every family is happy, twelve-year-old Jonas is chosen to be the community's Receiver of Memories. Under the tutelage of the Elders and an old man known as the Giver, he discovers the disturbing truth about his utopian world and struggles against the weight of its hypocrisy.

McCormick, P. (2006). *Sold*. New York: Hyperion.

Thirteen-year-old, Lakshmi lives an ordinary life in Nepal, going to school and thinking of the boy she is to marry. Then her gambling-addicted stepfather sells her into prostitution in India. Before an American comes to the brothel to rescue girls and provides her with a sense of hope, Lakshmi endures beatings and sexual abuse.

Myers, W. D. (1999). *Monster*. New York: Harper Collins.

While on trial as an accomplice to a murder, sixteen-year-old Steve records his experiences in prison and in the courtroom in the form of a film script as he tries to come to terms with the course his life has taken.

Paulsen, G. (1987). *Hatchet*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Brian, thirteen, is the only passenger on a small plane flying him to visit his father in the Canadian wilderness when the pilot has a heart attack and dies. After the plane crashes, Brian miraculously survives and the novel chronicles his mistakes, setbacks, and small triumphs as, with the help of a hatchet, he manages to survive the 54 days alone in the wilderness.

Sachar, L. (1998). *Holes*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux.

As further evidence of his family's bad fortune, which they attribute to a curse on a distant relative, Stanley is sent to a hellish correctional camp in the Texas desert where he finds his first real friend, a treasure, and a new sense of himself.

Schraff, A. (1989). *When a Hero Dies*. Logan: Perfection Learning.

High school track star, Tony Gibbs, grieves for the death of his friend, an elderly shopkeeper that served as Tony's mentor, coach, and confidant. Tony becomes obsessed with discovering his murderer and embarks on a course that puts a strain on his relationships with family and friends and places him in imminent danger.

Spinelli, J. (1982). *Space Station Seventh Grade*. New York: Little Brown.

Seventh-grader, Jason, narrates the events of his year, from school, hair, pimples, to mothers, little brothers, and a girl.

Steinbeck, J. (1938). *Of Mice and Men*. New York: Penguin Press.

A friendship is depicted between a strong man and his mentally challenged companion. Driven from job to job by the failure of the companion to fit into the social pattern, they finally find-in a ranch-what they feel their chance to achieve a homely dream they have built.

Strasser, T. (1981). *The Wave*. New York: Dell Laurel-Leaf.

History teacher Burt Ross introduces a "new" system to his students that resembles Nazism. "The Wave," with its rules of "strength through discipline, community, and action, " sweeps from the classroom and then through the entire school. Although most of the students join the movement, Laurie Saunders and

David Collins recognize the frightening momentum of "The Wave" and realize they must stop it before it's too late.

Taylor, T. (1969). *The Cay*. New York: Dell Yearling.

In 1942, eleven-year-old Phillip lives with his parents on the Dutch island of Curaçao, but when his boat is torpedoed, however, he is blinded and finds himself adrift on a life raft with an old black man and a cat. Although they eventually land on a deserted island, Phillip is suspicious of the man but soon grows to trust the patient and generous Timothy. Dedicated to "Dr. King's Dream," *The Cay* has a clear message that friendship is colorblind.

Wiesel, E. (1972). *Night*. New York: Hill and Wang.

A scholarly, pious teenager is wracked with guilt at having survived the horror of the Holocaust and the genocidal campaign that consumed his family. His memories of the nightmare world of the death camps present him with an intolerable question: how can the God he once so fervently believed in have allowed these monstrous events to occur?